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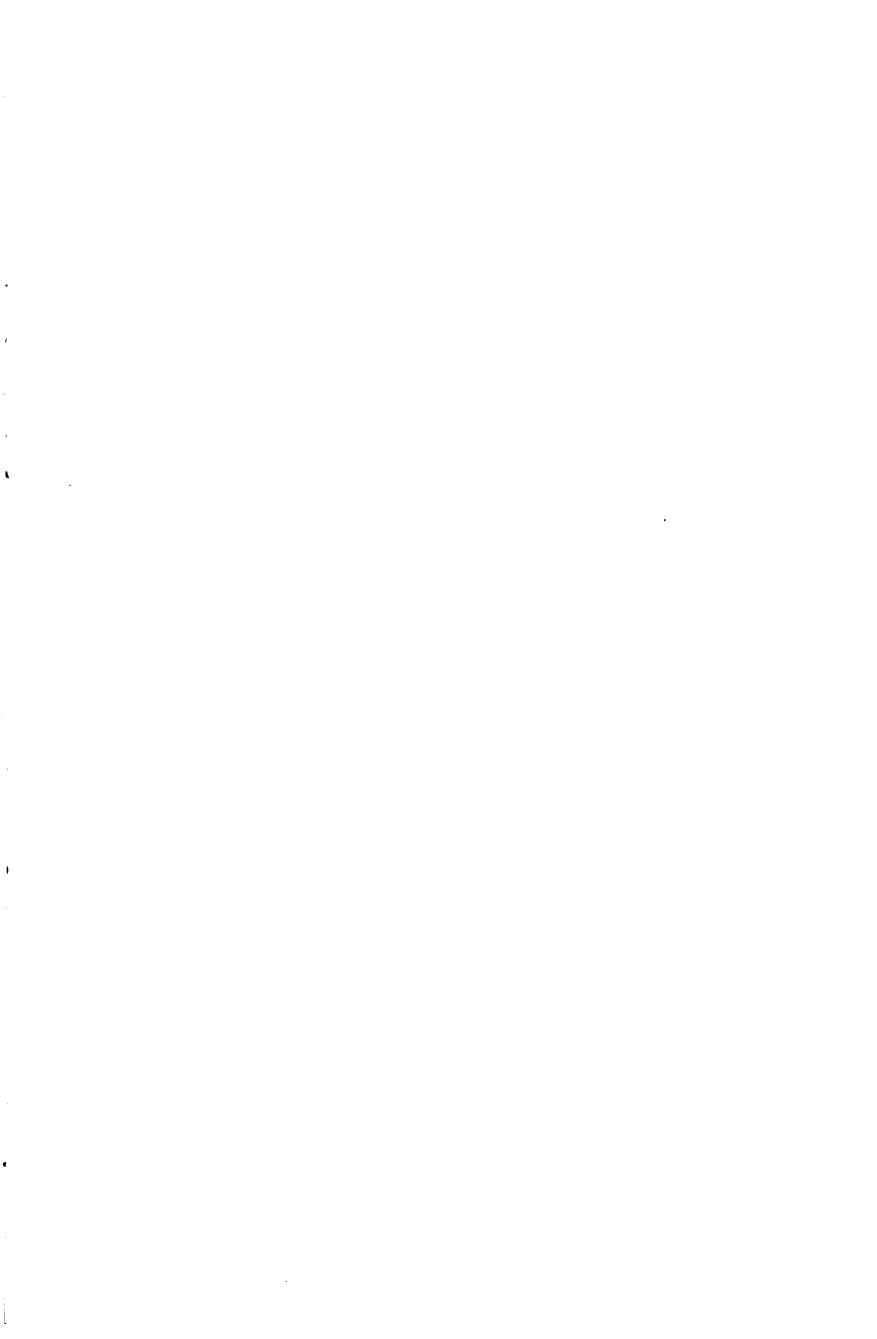


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THE BLOSSOM SHOP: A STORY OF THE SOUTH

BY
ISLA MAY MULLINS

ILLUSTRATED BY
JOHN GOSS



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TO MY FATHER AND MOTHER

Anson Wheeler

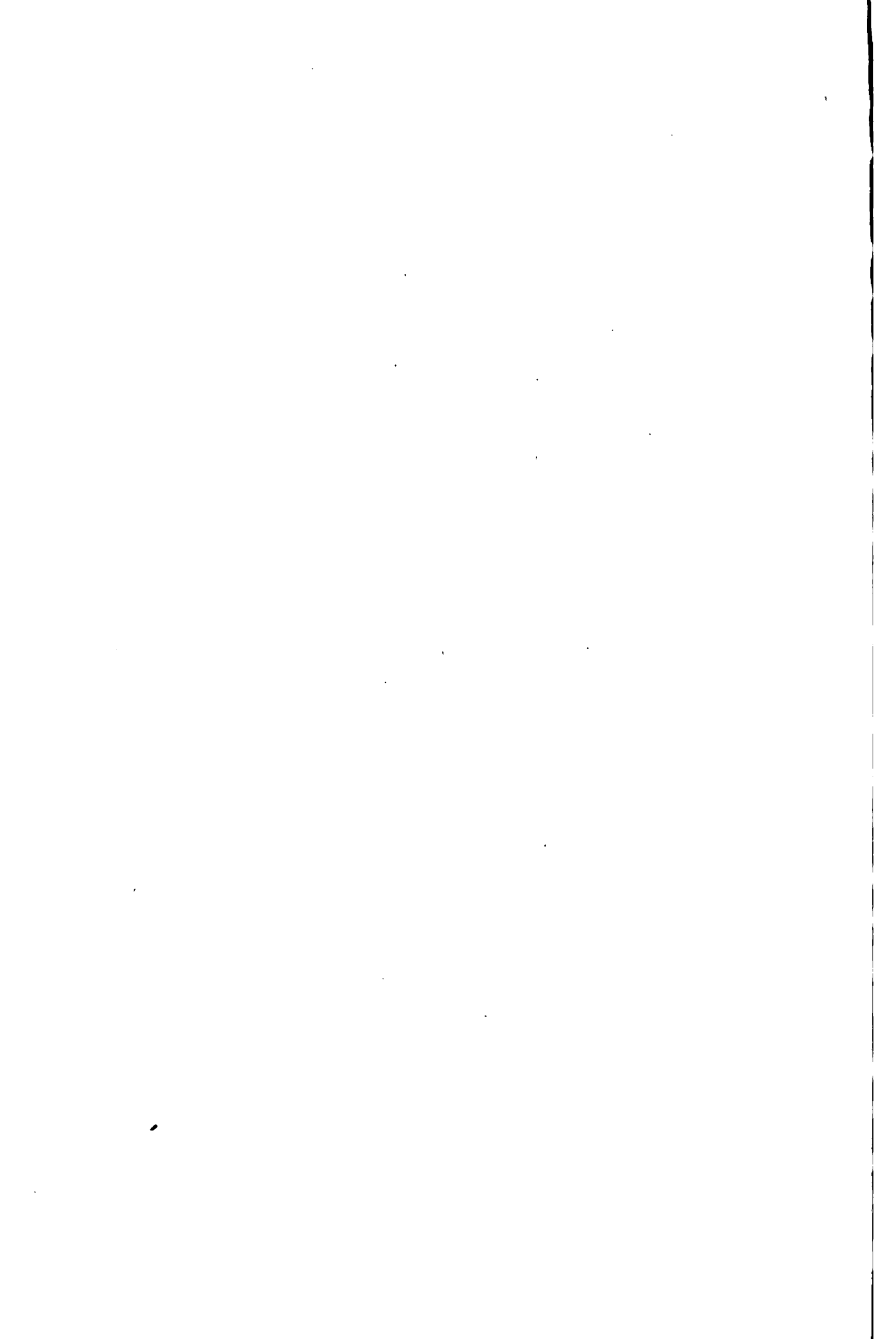
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Lydia Cobb Hawley

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THE BLOSSOM SHOP



CHAPTER I

CAPE JESSAMINES

“The hills untied their bonnets,
The bobolinks begun.
Then I said softly to myself,
‘That must have been the sun.’”

MRS. GREY began chanting the little verse in soft contralto tones with a lilting swing as they settled themselves to work in the early morning, and Gene joined gaily in with her clear, childish treble.

“Aren’t mornings beautiful?” the child said, as they ended the last word.

"Yes, — they are," agreed the mother, reserving the suggestion that man does not always think so.

"Mother, dear," the child went on, with renewed enthusiasm, "the florist will say these are the very prettiest flowers we have sent. They must be very big, for they smell the very nicest."

"Yes, Gene, they do," responded Mrs. Grey absently, as her deft fingers began sorting, wrapping and fitting the cape jessamines into boxes for shipping.

"I believe they are all grown-ups," the child again went on, — passing her hand lightly with inquiring touch about the tableful of beauties, but never marring their delicate perfection.

"I'm so afraid there isn't a single baby here," she added, with a grieved little voice, "and hardly a big girl or boy even."

Mrs. Grey smiled at the child's earnestness, and looking the blossoms rapidly over found a wee one which she placed in the small hands.

"Oh, I'm so glad! It would be too bad for them to go without a baby," said the child. And the little fingers lightly traced from beneath each waxy petal with satisfaction.

"Is this the only one, mother?" she said again after a moment. "We ought to have one baby for each box, you know."

"So we ought," replied Mrs. Grey, and again her quick eye ran over the flowers till she found half a dozen wee ones for the small, eager hands.

"Oh, aren't they nice!" exclaimed the child, touching each with a tiny finger and counting up to six. "Will there be six boxes, mother?"

"Yes, just about six this morning, I think."


The small hands clapped gaily. Then gathering the flowers up gently in her white apron skirt with one hand, and putting the other out with a pretty movement which robbed the groping of some of its pathos, the child made her way across the piazza to a little basin and put each flower carefully in.

"Now, babies, you must be good, get your dinner and sleep there till your mothers and fathers are ready to start."

Back again she tripped with scarce a motion of the little guiding hands, and then fell to work, wrapping stems and fitting the flowers into boxes with far greater skill than a seeing child of her age could have done.

There was the same grace and deftness

of movement in the child as in the mother; in fact, barring stronger tints in the mother's coloring, the one was almost a counterpart of the other. There was with both the well-shaped head, softly rounded cheeks and a certain delightful piquancy of expression that indicated few dull moments for them or those about them. Both were lithe and graceful in figure and somewhat petite. But the unruly, waving tendrils that played about the mother's face were a soft brown touched with gold, while the child's dancing curls were of gold shading oft into brown. The child's cheeks were a delicate pink, while the mother's easily flushed with warm, rich color. There was simplicity and daintiness in the dress of both, and in the midst of glossy, green leaves and white-petalled beauties, mother and child fitted into the



floral picture like rare blossoms of a larger growth.

"Mother, do I pack them nicely, now?" asked the child anxiously.

"Yes, darling, you do," Mrs. Grey returned tenderly.

Then a merry laugh rang out from the child. "What did the man say, mother, when we sent the first box?"

"Oh," her mother returned gaily, for it was an old story they loved to go over, "he said, 'Eugene Grey & Co., Dear Sirs: ' making her voice big and scary to the child's delight, "'You know nothing whatever about packing jessamines. Your flowers are fine, but you do not know your business,' " and both went off into happy peals of laughter. Then the child said:

"And he didn't dream that 'Eugene

Grey & Co.,’ were just you and me,— did he, mother?”

“No,’ indeed,” responded Mrs. Grey with a mist over her eyes, as she looked into the unseeing face of the little head of the firm.

“But we just tried till we found out how to do it right, didn’t we, mother?”

“Yes, we did, but we mustn’t forget that nice man in New York who helped us so much,” Mrs. Grey returned.

“Oh, no, we mustn’t!” exclaimed the child, “he did write us such a nice letter.—What did he say, mother?” always eager to hear it again.

“‘Eugene Grey & Co.,’” she began, knowing that it would never do to leave out the name of the firm.

“‘DEAR SIRs:—Your flowers are the finest ever sent me, but if you will par-

don my frankness, I will say that you do not pack them to good advantage. You take infinite pains, but much of your labor is wasted. I am taking the liberty of sending you a box of jessamines properly packed, and shall be greatly pleased if it proves of service to you by suggesting an improved method.

“ ‘Yours very truly,

“ ‘SHAW & COMPANY.

“ ‘Per Alfred M. Shaw.’ ”

Both knew by heart the letter which had meant so much to them, but Gene clasped her little hands with fresh joy when she heard it once more, and said ecstatically:

“ Oh, wasn’t that nice, mother? and when the box came we saw just how to do it right, didn’t we? ”

“ We did indeed,” said Mrs. Grey,

"and the beautiful blossoms have brought us so many good things since."

"Oh, mother, we began in the middle of the story," laughed Gene, with playful scorn in her small voice, "tell what the cape jessamines whispered and about the tall old gentleman who came to see you."

Mrs. Grey smiled, tucking carefully in the last fragrant, white beauty a box would hold, before she began at the beginning.

"Your dear father had gone, because God wanted him in Heaven," she said, her voice dropping into tender sadness; "it was five years ago, and you, a little three-year-old, and I were all alone, with almost nothing but the dear old house and Uncle Sam. I did not know how we were to live. It seemed to everyone that I must sell the old home and try to get

a place to teach somewhere." Then she roused herself from the sadness and went on with gentle gaiety.

"But, there was still mother's little Eugene, when her big Eugene was gone, and we walked about the dear old house and we said, 'there is grandfather's chair by the library table, we can sit here on the couch by the windows and dream that he is there still, and we will keep so quiet lest we disturb him as he reads.' Then out in the yard we walked among grandmother's flowers, and we could hear every cape jessamine whispering 'stay and take care of us for her sake,' and when we went to the long, cool porch, father seemed to smile at us from the pillows again, — and we said finally:

"'We will not leave the old place. God can take care of us here, and He will.'"

The child listened with rapt, exalted face.

“Then old Sam came around and we told him we were going to stay right here, and he said: ‘Bless Gord! An’ I’ll stay wid you an’ take kere of you lack I promise ole Mistis.’”

There was a pause while Mrs. Grey drew forward another box for packing.

“What next, mother?” asked the little listener.

“Well, Uncle Sam did stay and help us all he could, and we got along somehow for a year; but we needed money for many things, and we had very, very little. At last one day, when the cape jessamines blossomed again, came a tall, old gentleman from a town far away, who knew grandfather well, and who talked with us a long time about him. When he went away we walked down the

front steps with him and down the long gravelled way to the gate, with grandmother's cape jessamines growing each side all full of fragrant blossoms, and he exclaimed:

“‘How these would sell in northern cities! If they could be successfully shipped there, they would bring in a good sum of money each year.’ And I stopped still and said: ‘Tell me all you know about shipping flowers, please,’ and he looked at me surprised, but he told me a great deal about the flower trade of the North, for he was a retired florist, and how he thought jessamines might be shipped successfully. Then he took from his pocket a bit of paper with a receipt for a preservative to be used in shipping flowers and gave it to me. I thanked him, and when he was gone you and I skipped into the dear old house

again and we hugged and kissed one another!"

"Oh, didn't we?" laughed the child.

"Yes, and you didn't know what it was all about till I said: 'We'll go into business, my baby Eugene. Oh, the sweetest, dearest business in the world! We'll be flower merchants, baby; we'll turn the old house into a Blossom Shop, and the name of our firm will be "Eugene Grey & Co." You are "Eugene Grey," you know, and mother will be the "Co."' And we laughed and danced till we could no longer. Then we remembered that dear grandmother used to say few people were so poor they had nothing to share with others, and here was our chance. Most of us in the South are pretty poor since the war, but we do have more sunshine than people in the North, and we felt it would be lovely to send our rare

flowers with their beauty and fragrance to the cold North. The very next day we began packing grandmother's cape jessamines and shipping them away to big northern cities, and they brought us back money; the town schools, also, soon came to buy our japonicas and many other flowers for decorative use at their concerts, debates and various entertainments. So we have stayed in the dear old place, thanking the cape jessamines and all the other flowers every day for the good things they bring us."

"These jessamines, I am sure, are going to a wedding, mother," said the child after a moment, with the quaint look of a seer upon her face.

The mother laughed with the always ready response to the child's pretty fancies, and replied:

"Yes, I see, — the wedding of a dear

young girl as sweet and pure as the blossoms."

"What color hair has she, mother, and what are her eyes like?"

Mrs. Grey made pretense of consulting unseen authorities and then announced:

"Why, her hair is like gold spun into curling, gossamer threads, and her eyes are like the bluest blue violets!"

"Oh, what lovely things you always see!" exclaimed the child ecstatically.

Sometimes it was a little sick girl, or a crippled boy in a big hospital to whom they decided their flowers were going, and they pictured the delight when the box of sweet-smelling things were opened. Gene declared with a pathos of which she was wholly unconscious that things which smelled sweet were the *prettiest* things in the world! Or sometimes the blossoms were bound for

a baby's birthday party, or perhaps a specially beautiful waxen flower was to be clasped by tiny still hands, and the mother's skill made even this a sweet, dear mission for their treasures which held no sadness.

"Now they are done," announced Mrs. Grey, at last, "the six boxes of beauties."

"They are all ready for the dear babies then," cried Gene, and with a hand slightly lifted she tripped across to the basin where her baby flowers lay. She took them up tenderly saying: "Now, you must get on your soft warm cloaks," and carrying them back to the table, she wrapped each stem in fluffy cotton, kissed each baby blossom a rapturous good-by and tucked them, one by one, snugly in the center of each big box.

It had always been hard for the little

girl to see the dear flowers go without kissing them good-by, so they hit upon this plan of putting always an extra one in each box, a baby blossom which she could kiss to her heart's content.

High-spirited, independent, impulsive by nature, the mother's daily pivotal thought from Gene's babyhood had been to transmute everything into sweetness and light for the child, and she had learned well how to catch and reflect the inner gleam of every passing cloud, although within her own breast something bitter of which the little one knew nothing often heaved and surged. There was little of the business atmosphere consequently apparent with this unique firm. "Doing for others" seemed to be its watchword. There was always one big box of cape jessamines packed with special delight, which went to Shaw &

Co. of New York each May, marked, "For some Hospital," and no money came back in return. Then at Christmas another box was similarly marked and filled with japonicas, beautiful southern wax-like flowers of brilliant reds, pink in varying shades, and pure white, which did not ship successfully for commercial purposes, but which went quite well with no delays.

When the last baby jessamine was tucked in, the child turned to her mother, anxiety in her voice.

"Are there any flowers left, mother?"

"Why, yes, there are five or six very pretty ones."

"Then we can take them to Aunt Calline this evening, can't we? Uncle Sam says 'de mis'ry in her back was most concruciating de las' time he seed her,'" said the little girl, merrily imitating

Uncle Sam. Then sobering instantly, she asked, "Could there be some broth, mother?"

"Yes, darling, I think so," the mother replied.

Giving had always been a part of living in the old Dawson home. Few there were in the little southern town about whose door-yard flowers did not spring up almost unbidden, but barren negro cabins, not a few, were transformed in sickness or sorrow by blossoms from the old Dawson yard, while a bowl of soup or some small delicacy took the place of substantial supplies which once went freely from a full larder.

CHAPTER II

A GAY CAVALCADE

THE boxes of jessamines were hardly disposed of when there came a tramping of heavy hoofs, mingled with merry talk and laughter of children. Gene's head was poised a moment, listening, then joy lit up her small face.

"They are coming, mother; coming for me, I know," and even as she said it, a great black mule loaded with children from neck to tail came around the corner of the house to the rear piazza where the flowers had been packed.

"Here we are," cried Hannie Carter, small driver of the big black steed, "and

there's room for Gene, Mrs. Grey, and we'll take *such* good care of her. You know old Queen never did anything bad in the world,—she's the dearest old mulie ever was," and she leaned forward to stroke the big, black ears while the old mule looked kindly from her sleepy eyes as if to reassure Mrs. Grey.

"Oh, mother, mother, do let me go," begged Gene, dancing up and down in a flutter of delight.

Before Mrs. Grey could answer, another big, black mule turned the corner of the house similarly loaded with merry children.

"Oh, Mrs. Grey," began May Carter, the second small driver, almost out of breath in her haste, "do let me have Gene this time? You know old King is *such* a good mule!"

"But I got here first," said Hannie stoutly.

"Well, you had Gene last time," retorted May.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," cried Mrs. Grey, laughing. "Where are you going, small travellers?"

"To g-r-a-n-d-m-o-t-h-e-r's," came a chorus of gay voices, drawing the word out to lengthen the delight.

Uncle Sam stood by the piazza steps, his old hat in one hand, his kindly black face softened by a gray crown of hair meeting a thick, short mass of white beard in a snowy circle, his old figure bent and poorly clad, but holding a certain dignity of bearing.

"I'll go 'long, Miss Alice, ter see ter 'em," he said, for he could not resist the pleading, eager face of the little child of his heart. She ran forward at the sound

of his voice and jumped, unseeing, into his big arms, knowing they would be ready for her.

"We're going to have her," cried Hannie. "*We're* going to have her," clamored May, and before Mrs. Grey could speak, old Sam put out a staying hand:

"Now, yer jes' let me fix dat. She's gwine wid Miss Hannie, 'cause she got here fust, but she's er coming back wid Miss May, 'cause we won't have no favorin'," and that settled it.

In the rough, black arms Gene was carefully lifted to a place in the center of the wriggling line of merry, laughing children on old Queen's back. There seemed always room for one more on that broad expanse.

Then, as the mules turned slowly around amid squeals of delight, Gene

waved a hand to mother, her little face radiant, and Mrs. Grey waved gaily in return, feeling sure that with Uncle Sam in charge no harm could come.

Down Main Street they went, waving and shouting merrily to the people they passed, for everybody knew the Carter children and the two fine carriage mules, which had always been their playmates.

The big, black fellows were gentle as great dogs, and knew well their responsibility, when loaded with happy little folks.

Main Street straggled through the small Alabama town where the Greys and Carters lived, creeping in at the north from picturesque, red-clay hills and turning out or in accommodatingly, as it went, to include everything of importance, except the schools. It gathered in

the big, dignified antebellum homes in the suburbs at either end, then the stores, the hotel, the court-house and the churches. Finally, as if to make up for its neglect of the two fine old colleges, which were left with their beautiful campuses on either side, it made a sharp détour near the southern end to reach the sleepy little railroad station, where trains came in bringing troops of boys and girls to the schools in the fall and carried them away again in the late spring. The straggling street was lost at last in the south amid fertile farms and luxurious woodlands.

Not far from the abrupt turn near the southern end of the street stood the homes of the Greys and Carters, somewhat apart from their fellows. The Carter house was square and dignified, with massive white pillars in stately row

across the front, reaching from the veranda floor to its roof; broad halls separating spacious rooms on either side of two floors, while a big attic filled the space above. Tall shrubs, perfectly trimmed, outlined the yard, arched the entrance and followed the paths about roomy flower beds, while magnolias, japonicas, citronalis, syringas, altheas and crepe myrtles grew luxuriantly everywhere. Mr. John Carter lived there with his two motherless little girls, Hannie and May, eleven and nine years old, and Mammy Sue, their capable old colored nurse.

Big, branching trees with nesting mocking-birds hung protectingly over the old place where the Greys lived. It was one-storied, broad verandas following its rambling outline, and wide halls intersecting it at right angles, through

which swept the summer breezes, laden with the fragrance of row after row of blossoming cape jessamines. It was called the Dawson place, though bearers of the old name had all passed away, and Mrs. Grey and her little daughter, last descendants of the fine old family, lived there alone with Uncle Sam, the old colored man-servant, in the yard.

The inmates of the two houses had always been closest friends, and now it was one of Gene's great delights to be with Hannie and May. Hannie was large for her age, her light hair sunburned and wind-blown, her gray-blue eyes big and merry and eager with the delights of ever-new plans; impulsive, blundering, she was always getting into some difficulty, but as surely coming out safely through her honest intentions and warm-

heartedness, which won her friends everywhere. May was small with dark hair always precisely combed, soft dark eyes and rosy cheeks; a dear, happy, dependent child, just her sister's opposite in many things.

If Gene loved to be with her two little friends, they as certainly loved to have her, and nothing was nicer for all three than to go on a frolic with the mules. Mrs. Grey often trusted them with Gene when they went alone, but she could not have let the child go with the spirited company of that June day without Uncle Sam.

The gay cavalcade soon passed the little railroad station and jogged on merrily into the country about a mile, when they drew up before a beautiful old plantation home, where the Carter children's maternal grandmother lived.

They halted before the gate with a chorus of gay "Hellos," and grandmother, a round, smiling old lady, soon came slowly down the front walk to meet them. Of course there must always be some "make-believe," and she was ready for it.

"Howdy!" said Hannie, who was usually spokeswoman, as grandmother came near to them. "Can you keep a poor family for a little while and let 'em rest a spell, lady?"

"Why, certainly," replied grandmother, "just light and hitch," falling into the parlance of "poor whites." "Are these all your children?" she went on.

"Yes, they're all mine," said Hannie, while the rest giggled behind one another in delight, "but they are not all I've got. Most of my children are at

home with the measles," and then they laughed outright.

"Is that so?" cried grandmother, pushing up her spectacles. "Well, you shall have some sassafras to take back with you and make tea to bring the measles out good, and your 'chillun' will soon be well."

"Thank you so much, lady. I've heard how good you are, and that's the reason I come to see you."

"Just get right down, all of you, for I know you will be needing some tea cakes and lemonade. But I want the dear little girl in the middle first," and Uncle Sam, grinning in as much enjoyment as the children, handed Gene down to the motherly arms of Grandmother Butler.

Into the house they trooped and overflowed the place, running riot every-

where. Somebody always had hold of Gene's hand, and her little feet went flying with the rest.

They played hide-and-seek, prisoner's base, and "Chickie me, chickie me, cranie crow," out under the big trees, till, breathless at last, they sat down on the front porch steps, and then grandmother served the lemonade and tea cakes. How delicious it was!

As they sat there in comparative quiet, Gene said ecstatically, "Grandmothers are so nice, aren't they? I wish I had just one grandmother," with a little plaintive note in her voice.

"Well, your Grandmother Dawson was all right," spoke up a clear little voice, "but I should think you'd be glad your Grandmother Grey was dead, — she was so mean."

The listeners all were appalled at the

child's frankness, and frightened wonder flashed upon Gene's sweet face, which in the moment's silence following the speech settled into little hurt quivers about the mouth.

Then Hannie Carter sprang noiselessly for the offending child and taking her stoutly by the arm hurried her away, while May with quick tact took Gene's hand in hers and cried:

"Oh, I know what let's do! Get grandmother to tell us a story about when she was a little girl! Won't you, grandmother, dear?" and the story began promptly.

When Hannie had the small offender out of hearing, she demanded:

"Oh, what made you say that?"

The little girl looked frightened, and faltered:

"I didn't mean to — don't Gene know

her Grandmother Grey was mean — I thought everybody knew it," the child ended stoutly.

"No, she doesn't," declared Hannie emphatically, "and I know Mrs. Grey wouldn't have her told for anything!"

"I didn't know," said the other beginning to cry, and Hannie Carter, always big-hearted and blundering herself, put her arms about the little transgressor repentantly:

"Never mind. I hear grandmother telling a lovely story, we'll go back and I reckon Gene will forget all about it."

But Gene did not forget; she was quiet during the rest of the stay and the ride home, though the children scarcely noticed, so gay were they themselves.

CHAPTER III

WAS GRANDMOTHER GREY MEAN?

LATE in the afternoon when Gene and Mrs. Grey strolled together among the flowers in their own big yard, the child made her mother's heart stand still when she asked:

"Mother, was my Grandmother Grey mean?"

Mrs. Grey knew instantly some one had been talking to her, and that bitter hidden thing in her breast beat with sudden fury against long restraint, but after a moment's pause to steady herself, she replied:

"No, dear, I do not think your Grandmother Grey was mean. I never saw

her, but your father loved her most tenderly."

"Why did Susie Milton say she was mean, then?"

"There is a story I meant to tell my little girl when she was older —"

"Oh, mother, tell me now, — I can't be wondering if Susie was right about my dear Grandmother Grey," and the little slender hands clung pleadingly to the mother's.

"Well, dearie," said Mrs. Grey slowly, girding herself for the task of making the story meet for such a hearing, "it is just a little bit of a story. Your father's home was in the North, but he was South one winter on business, and he met me and wanted that we should stay together as long as we lived. He wrote his father and mother a letter telling them he wanted to marry a southern girl,

but you know in that dreadful war, we had not so very long ago, — the war between brothers north and south, — many people in the North learned to dislike people in the South, and many in the South to dislike those in the North. Your Grandfather Grey was one who felt very bitterly toward southern people, and he was extremely angry when your father wanted to marry a southern girl, — so angry that he never forgave father. So we always lived here, and your father never went to his home again. But Grandmother Grey wrote to him always, and to you and me after he was gone. In less than a year after your dear father left us, Grandfather and Grandmother Grey both died the same night. It was thought that the shock of his death, coming in the night while she was alone with him, caused her death, for she was

found kneeling beside his bed the next morning." Feeling the little hand tighten nervously upon her own, the mother went on steadily:

"It was a beautiful way for the two to go to Heaven, — to go together after so many years with one another on earth." Then there was a pause for several minutes.

"Well, I don't see why they call grandmother mean," said Gene, at last, a little indignantly.

"It is unjust, I am sure, so far as she was concerned," replied the mother quietly. "But your grandfather was a very wealthy man and he did not leave you, his son's little girl, a cent of his money," the words were a bit crisper now. "I believe grandmother would have been glad to leave it all to you," softening again, "but she did not have

the opportunity, and yet people generally blame them both, so that is probably why Susie said what she did. The money all went to your grandfather's sister, a maiden lady, your great-aunt, with plenty of money of her own. Some day I will show you the letter she wrote to us telling us all about it. And now, dearie," firmly, "I want you to love Grandmother Grey just as you always have, — and Grandfather Grey, too, for I don't doubt he thought he was doing exactly right," she compelled herself to add.

"Your father always said he was a very upright and kind man, though very stern."

The two walked quietly a few minutes more and then Gene began:

"Mother dear, read me the letter from my great-aunt." She never forgot what

she heard, the little ears held tenaciously what came to them, to make up for what the eyes failed to bring.

Knowing that the child would not rest until she knew all, Mrs. Grey at once led Gene into the house and took from her desk drawer a letter some four years old.

Long restraint was standing the high-spirited young mother in good stead in this unexpected crisis.

She drew Gene down beside her on the library couch, and folding an arm quietly about her began the reading:

“MRS. EUGENE GREY.

“DEAR MADAM:—My previous letter of last week gave you the details of the death of my dear brother James and his wife, father and mother of your late husband. I write now to tell you that by the terms of my brother’s will, which has just

been probated, I, his only sister and near relative, am made sole heir to his estate. Lydia, his beloved wife, was given a lifetime interest, which in the providence of God was exceedingly brief. I can but carry out conscientiously the wishes of my esteemed brother, on whose wise judgment I have always relied. It seemed to him unwise to turn over to you and your child, the earnings of his busy life, and I respect his conclusions."

Between indignation, resentment and protective tenderness for the unseeing child the mother's heart was in a tumult as she approached the next sentence. Never had she taken advantage of the child's infirmity for real deception, but she could not read quietly aloud the following cruel words:

“ I realize that your child is blind, but can only remind you that this was probably in the providence of God a judgment sent upon poor, erring Eugene for his utter disregard of parental authority. See Exodus, twentieth chapter, verse five. And even if I should be willing to set aside my brother’s wishes, I dare not interfere with the dispensations of Providence.”

Desperately Mrs. Grey plunged past this, touching the letter at a point below.

“ Lydia, the wife of my brother James, fully forgave her son, your husband, and would gladly have given his widow and his child everything she possessed, so I am sending you by express, at my expense, a trunk full of her clothing, of which I am sure you can make use, if

properly brought up in economy and thrift.

“Yours sincerely and faithfully,

“MARTHA GREY.”

There had been times when Mrs. Grey had found grim humor in this part of the letter, but for the little girl's ears it seemed so cold and hard that the mother's breast heaved as she finished, though her voice was still steady, and holding herself firmly she went on at last in a matter-of-fact way:

“Now, dearie, Mr. Carter said he was sure we could break that will of your grandfather's and get all the money, and he urged me to do it, — but, sweetheart, would we want it if grandfather didn't want us to have it?”

And the little figure straightened in the mother's arms, with the blood of

proud ancestry both north and south, and said with the firmness of a mature woman:

“No, mother, no!”

The mother gathered the little one to her heart with tears quivering upon the proud gleam in her eyes, but not one drop was allowed to touch the small head, lest it bring distress to that brave little spirit.

After a moment the child asked softly:

“Mother, did the trunk ever come?”

“Yes, dear.”

Another pause, but Mrs. Grey knew well what the child wanted, so she went on:

“I have never opened it, darling. I am waiting till you are grown, when I shall be stouter-hearted, I hope, and you, my precious little girl, may be standing beside me then, *looking* with me.”

"Oh, won't that be lovely! I believe I will, mother, I do truly!"

Then, after a moment, the child turned with some instinct toward the setting sun, questioning wistfully:

"Tell me how the sun sets, mother."

And Mrs. Grey, summoning her accustomed gaiety, repeated rhythmically:

"How he sets I know not,
There seems a purple stile
Which little yellow boys and girls
Are climbing all the while."

paraphrasing a bit upon the little sun poem they had recently come to love.

"I'm glad the little yellow boys and girls are still there," said the child joyously, and the mother knew it meant to the little girl who could not see a subtle reassurance of the joys of life after a first touch of its bitterness and its sorrow.

CHAPTER IV

UNCLE SAM'S ECONOMIES

BUT it had been a day of unusual emotion for Mrs. Grey with all this going over of past things, and when Gene was in her little bed asleep the mother paced the cape jessamine walk from the front piazza to the front gate, again and again. The full moon turned every snow-white jessamine into a silver star of hope, and at last she stopped beside them murmuring:

“Yes, yes, I believe her sight will come, but I must *know*, I cannot bear suspense any longer.”

Then she went around the house to Uncle Sam's cabin and found him sit-

ting on his door-step, smoking a cob-pipe. He rose as quickly as his stiff joints would let him.

"Uncle Sam," she began hurriedly, "I do not know if there is really any hope that Gene will ever see. I feel I just cannot stand the suspense any longer," and her voice ended in a sob.

The old negro shuffled noisily on the step to cover the break in her voice, and said hastily:

"Yas'm, Miss Alice, yas'm, er co'se ye gotter know. Hit stan's ter reason ye can't wait."

By this time she had regained control and went on steadily:

"I must take Gene away to some eye specialist and have her eyes thoroughly examined."

"Yas'm, yas'm, I shore would," returned the old darky heartily.

"We've got a good bit of money in the bank now, and I believe it would help me to get more if I knew definitely there was hope."

"Er co'se hit would!" old Sam exclaimed.

So the next week Mrs. Grey stood in the doctor's office at the nearest large town, while he examined the little girl's eyes.

With utmost care the physician made every test, while the mother steadily held a small, tense hand, her heart almost breaking with suspense, but showing no sign.

At last the physician said cheerily:

"Now, we will go out where there is the sweetest bird singing, and you can listen, little one, while mother and I come back here for a talk."

So Gene was comfortably seated be-

side a warbling canary, and Mrs. Grey went back with the doctor to the consulting-room.

She stood before him unable to ask a question, but the doctor did not wait.

"Madam, I believe Dr. Eastman of New York can give your child sight. Mind you, *I believe*," he said sternly, seeing the rush of joy.

"I haven't the skill," he went on a little sadly, "but I *think* Dr. Eastman has."

There was silence a moment as she struggled to stem with his uncertainty the tide of joy within her, lest hope overwhelm her. At last she asked:

"It will cost a great deal?"

"Yes," said the doctor, letting his glance rest keenly upon her face instead of upon her quiet, tasteful costume, which might have meant either wealth or poverty. "There is no hurry for another

year or two; it might be better to wait until she is a year or two older."

"Thank you," returned Mrs. Grey with warm gratitude. Time would mean much to her slowly growing bank account.

She settled her bill with the doctor, which his keen insight led him to make extremely moderate, and then the mother went to the little room where the child waited alone.

The canary was fairly throbbing with his outpour of melody, but the little one sat waiting with tightly clasped hands, straining for the sound of her mother's footstep. She did not even rush forward when it came at last, but still sat tensely immovable, like a beautiful waxen flower.

"Darling," exclaimed Mrs. Grey, kneeling gently before the child and

clasping her with repressed joy, "the big doctor thinks you may see some day."

The little face quivered pitifully a moment, then joy flashed over it.

"I am so glad, mother, — for you; but I don't mind not seeing, — I b'lieve I'm most afraid of seeing, — I'd rather trust you and God and Uncle Sam," with a little tremulous laugh.

The doctor standing in the doorway dropped back, brushing his eyes furtively.

When Mrs. Grey returned home with Gene and told the joyful news, she had serious trouble with Uncle Sam. The old darky, who had continued with his "white folks" after the war was over and freedom declared, had always refused wages, saying: "He jes' wanted what he needed lack the res' of the fambly," and when the failure of a bank and death left

Mrs. Grey with a very small income, his needs grew remarkably few. She had trouble constantly to make him take sufficient money from her for reasonable comfort. But when Sam learned that sight awaited little Gene, the idol of his warm old heart, so soon as there was money enough for the trip to New York, and to pay the big doctor there, Mrs. Grey could hardly keep clothes on his back and shoes on his feet.

She urged him to get new footwear without avail, and at last as cold weather came on, she handed him a pair of stout new shoes which she had herself bought for him.

"Now, Miss Alice," said old Sam with righteous indignation in his voice, "I tole you I didn't need no shoes." Then as his protruding toes bound in rags proclaimed the falsity of that statement,

he qualified it with another: "Leastways I can't wear 'em, kase my foots is kinder sore-like, and they has ter have air," he ended deprecatingly.

Mrs Grey hid a tender smile, but insisted firmly that he *must* wear the shoes.

Very soon he began coming to her with odd sums of money; he had sold a few potatoes "outen the garden" or some chestnuts "offen the aidge of the place," and she grew sorely troubled over the matter, but the old negro's joy was so great and the sums were so small that she hadn't the heart to refuse them.

Sam suffered much with rheumatism, as winter came on. A good-natured young white boy hearing him complain, took a flask of whisky from his pocket and handing it to the old fellow, said:

"Here, take this, Uncle Sam, it will

cure you of that 'rheumatiz,' and I s'pose it ain't good for me."

Old Sam smiled with delight, having a negro's weakness for whisky, and ambled to his cabin with alacrity. But as he was about to pour out a good, stiff drink, he stayed his hand.

"Look here, I'se a good church member, an' I specs I better let dis stuff er lone."

"But there is the rheumatiz," said the tempter, "hit's jes' gwine ter cure dat, — 'tain't no sin ter take medicine."

How the battle between the church member's conscience and the tempter would have ended is uncertain, but suddenly there flashed before the old darky a vision of a little sweet face and small groping hands.

He put the bottle down instantly, the liquor untasted.

"I kin sell dat out ter niggers in dis here dry town, an' get a lot o' money outer it fer Miss Alice's bank," he said, and the church member's conscience did not seem in the least astir on this point. He watered it freely and sold it out by the swallow!

Mrs. Grey looked greatly troubled when he handed her some money a few nights later. She could not imagine where he got so large a sum.

He grinned delightedly: "Now, Miss Alice, don't be pesterin' your head. I earned hit all right here on dis place."

He began also to look askance upon all needless expenditures of the family.

One day he stood by Mrs. Grey while she fried some fritters for their dinner. "Miss Alice," he ventured, "dem takes a heap er lard."

"Yes, they do," Mrs. Grey acknowledged.

"I don't think yer can 'ford 'em, Miss Alice," he said solemnly.

And her laugh rang out as she declared, "Now, Uncle Sam, you are not going to persuade me to give up fritters," for nobody cared so much for them as Uncle Sam himself.

CHAPTER V

LOVE TURNED AWAY

WHEN their friends, the Carters, learned of the glad possibility for Gene, Mr. Carter, big, strong, gentle, a very well-to-do lawyer, came at once to see Mrs. Grey. He had come before with fruitless errand of the heart, but now his fine dark eyes were alight with fresh hope, his broad shoulders thrown back and his step eager.

It was evening and she sat alone on her piazza gowned in the white she usually wore, and full of the charm which had long ago mastered him. She saw his tall, well-built figure turn into her gate, and watched its graceful, vigor-

ous swing as he came, hat in hand, with quick stride up the walk, the moonlight first outlining his fine head with its waving dark brown hair and then revealing the smooth high-bred face, — stamped for woman's love and trust, — and her alert eye caught the spirit of braced shoulders and eager step, putting her instantly on the defensive.

She greeted him in easy, friendly courtesy, then said with bantering gaiety:

“ I'm so glad you've come! I've found a new poet whom you will want to know.” They were both lovers of books.

“ Alice, — ” he began in strong, resonant tones that had nothing to do with poetry; she knew. Being older than she he had domineered over her when they were children, she had often told him, and always expected to, it seemed.

“ Now, John,” she broke in, “ I am

literary this evening, encourage me, — it is so hard for a business woman to find time for such things, — ” and she well knew how he hated the thought of business for her. “ The new poet is Emily Dickinson. A college friend in the East sent the book to me not long ago, and Emily certainly has more delightful quirks and turns, more unexpectedness than any one I know. I want to give you some things that Gene and I have been so charmed with.”

“ All right,” the man returned at last quietly, “ if you still want to when I have said something to you.”

“ But, do you think that is polite,” she returned, “ to thrust in first the thing which interests you? ”

Sometimes in the past she had been able to capture his interest with her womanly gaiety and completely foil his

intentions, but now she knew intuitively that her banter was hopeless, and yet something drove her desperately on.

“Just listen to this,” she said:

“‘I’m nobody! Who are you?

Are you nobody, too?

Then there’s a pair of us — don’t tell,

They’d banish us, you know.’

“Gene thinks that is delightful. There is more of it. We have said it over till we know it by heart. This is another Gene and I love:

“‘I’ll tell you how the sun rose,—

A ribbon at a time.

The steeples swam in amethyst,

The news like squirrels ran.

“‘The hills untied their bonnets,

The bobolinks begun.

Then I said softly to myself,

“That must have been the sun!’”

“Gene makes me say that to her every morning, and at sunset we have the other half:

“‘But how he sets, I know not.
There seemed a purple stile
Which little yellow boys and girls
Were climbing all the while.

“‘Till when they reached the other side
A dominee in gray
Put gently up the evening bars,
And led the flock away.’”

A patch of moonlight flickered through the trees upon her lovely face as she recited the little poem in her soft lilting way, while underneath the gaiety in a strain of pathos ran an undefined yearning to draw him into the common joys of life with her, — the daily morning sunrise and the beauty of the sunset, — since she could not meet the full de-

mand of his heart. But utter silence gave back the sweet allurements and her gaiety ran completely down.

"I can talk about but one thing to-night, Alice," the man said firmly at last, "and you must listen," was added with the masterful note in his voice before which woman capitulates.

There was a moment's silence again, then:

"Alice," he repeated, "I am here to ask you once more, — come to me and let me care for you and Gene," and his voice, dropping the masterful tone, held a tender, glad thrill of renewed hope.

"Oh, don't, John," she exclaimed, leaning forward in tense earnestness, "for I cannot, — I must not be tempted. It is not sure that she can ever see, and you know I have told you that my little helpless child must have all my mother-heart;

I could not give your children equal measure, and I would not offer them scant mother-love, when they have been denied it nearly all their little lives. Please do not say any more about it."

A long silence fell between them. John Carter scorned to plead the need of himself or his children, though, had he chosen, he might have presented their case most eloquently. He was a lawyer of ability, but the little southern town did not offer great things even in return for ability, and Mammy Sue administered the affairs of his household with an exceedingly lavish hand. She had been trained in the affluence of ante-bellum days and now disdained economy. His motherless little girls were not being reared to meet the necessities of the new south. They never dressed themselves or cared for their clothes, and when Mr.

Carter suggested that they should be taught these things, and to sew as well, Mammy Sue's nose went high in the air. And yet she was so capable, so high-minded in the best as well as in the foolish sense that he could not afford to lose her. In fact, dismissing Mammy Sue would have been a most difficult process. Neither she nor the children dreamed that such a step was physically possible except through death. Had she not belonged to Mr. Carter's mother and her ancestors to the Carter family for generations back? So Mr. Carter had to see his children being poorly prepared for their probable future, when close at hand was the one who could train them with consummate womanly skill, and, at the same time, one with the delicate tact and understanding necessary to reconstruct Mammy Sue's views of life. As

for himself, he simply could not do it; after his most well-directed effort with her he could vividly imagine the scorn with which she inwardly proclaimed:

“Men-folks don’t know nothin’ ’bout things! Reckon I’s gwine to listen to him and make my chillum jes’ lack po’ white trash? Not ef I kin he’p it, — I’ll work dese ole fingers to de bone fust!”

But John Carter never mentioned these things to Alice Grey. He offered her the strong, abundant love of his mature manhood, a love based upon early youth’s first passion. Another love had intervened, but he knew now that it had been a far lighter bond of the soul, sweet and true though it had seemed. He had offered the woman of his early and mature love and her helpless child again and again the highest, best that was in him, — should that not be enough? He

would not dwell upon it again, and he could not plead any need of his that her heart did not voluntarily come out to meet.

So after the long silence John Carter braced himself and said again gently:

“Alice, let me advance you the money to have this operation performed. I am able to do it.”

She leaned back in her chair and looked away from him for a moment, then replied firmly:

“I thank you, John, but I might never be able to pay you.”

“I don’t care if you don’t,” were words which leaped hotly to his lips, but he restrained himself, and said quietly instead:

“Oh, yes, you will, — you are sure to, — but it will be so much easier if you take your time getting the money. If you

must earn it while the little girl is waiting for sight, you will feel so hurried."

Her lips trembled at the tenderness which the last held, but grew firm again instantly.

"I must earn the money *first*, John," she said, putting out a hand to him, and he knew that was final.



CHAPTER VI

HURRAH FOR THE BLOSSOM SHOP!

EVERY bit of available space had been long planted in cape jessamines on the old place, and Mrs. Grey had extended the business as far as possible, but in spite of all her industry and economy, together with Uncle Sam's surreptitious earnings, the bank account increased very slowly in the light of that new hope. She grew restless and troubled.

Along the middle of November, one beautiful clear day, the Carter children had Gene between them on old Queen's back. When they rode up to the door after an hour in the woods, the old mule

was much festooned with wild southern smilax, looking very gay, if long-suffering withal.

"Isn't old Queen beautiful?" cried Hannie.

"She is," laughed Mrs. Grey, and then an idea flashed instantly through her mind. "Wouldn't that smilax be fine for house decorations! I am going to send samples of it to northern florists!" were her inward declarations.

Next day she had old Sam go out to the woods and gather enough to make up a number of sample boxes, which she shipped at once to the dealers whom she supplied with jessamines.

A few days later came a dispatch from a Chicago firm ordering a number of pounds immediately.

Mrs. Grey had no idea how to estimate the weight of the amount sent to this

order, but she had Uncle Sam get out the old surrey and horse and she and Gene drove, in fine spirits, out in the woods for the smilax. They gathered beautiful, graceful sprays in armfuls and piled them into the surrey until, when they started home, it looked like a veritable traveling evergreen.

Gene put out her little hands, touching leaves everywhere, and laughed in glee as she said:

“Oh, mother, what will they do with all this?”

They hurried home, packed a big box and sent it off post-haste. But when a letter came back in equal haste, Mrs. Grey held her breath at its angry vehemence.

Then a ringing laugh followed as she saw the ludicrous in it all. “Oh, Gene darling, they are scolding us dreadfully,”

she said at last between the ripples of laughter. "Just listen:

" 'EUGENE GREY & Co.,

" 'DEAR SIRs: — ' " she read, in the big scary voice, laying a hand on Gene's as it rested on her knee.

The little girl was all eager expectation.

" 'You certainly know absolutely nothing about the flower business. I wired you to ship me — lbs. of your southern smilax, as you call it, and you sent me barely a quarter of that amount. You caused me to disappoint a most valued customer. I ought to withhold payment for the miserable little lot you sent, but here's your check.

" 'Get a move on you now, won't you,

and ship me —— lbs. more by return express.' ”

“ Oh, mother, isn't he mad! ” said Gene, her small face full of wonder.

Mrs. Grey fluttered a check happily, and reassured her with:

“ Oh, we must just get lots more at once, and next time we must weigh it and know exactly what we are about. ”

A letter followed from the firm in New York who had so kindly shown them how to pack cape jessamines, and it said, “ If you are shipping this for the first time, as we judge from your note with sample box, we may be able to help with suggestion for weighing and packing, ” and then followed some most helpful hints. Other florists sent orders and Eugene Grey & Co. found themselves with much business on hand. The Blos-

som Shop, as they always playfully called the old place now, was in much excitement, indeed quite flustered.

"We must propitiate that Chicago man first," said Mrs. Grey. It was late Friday afternoon; she must think fast.

"Uncle Sam, hitch up the spring wagon, go up town as quickly as you can and get me half a dozen large goods boxes. Get them weighed and have the weight marked upon each one. Then tomorrow we will go into the woods for our smilax."

"Oh, let us go too, please, Mrs. Grey," begged Hannie Carter, who with May and Gene were playing within hearing.

"I am afraid there will not be room for you," said Mrs. Grey. "I wasn't even going to take Gene, but leave her with you."

"That would be nice," replied Hannie

a little tamely, "but oh, Mrs. Grey, we would go on old Queen, with Gene between us, and that would be lovely!" she ended enthusiastically.

Mrs. Grey, looking into the three little, eager faces, could not refuse, even though she felt it to be too strictly a business expedition for enjoyment, so she said at last: "Very well."

Uncle Sam came in later with the big boxes properly weighed, and by bedtime everything was made ready for an early start and an all day in the woods.

To Mrs. Grey's surprise, instead of the Carter children coming on old Queen next morning, they hailed her gaily from the broad seat of the big Carter wagon with King and Queen in the traces, and the Carters' man-servant riding Queen and driving.

"Here we are, Mrs. Grey. Do

p-l-e-a-s-e let Gene come with us," they cried.

Mrs. Grey smiled, and murmured under her breath, "I see, John Carter, you are determined to help me."

Uncle Sam lifted Gene to a place between Hannie and May who hugged her rapturously, and then from beneath the broad spring-seat upon which they sat came a sudden squawking cry of "Get up, get up," and Hannie and May giggled uncontrollably.

"Now, Polly," Hannie cried reproachfully when she could speak, "we told you to keep still and not let anybody know you were there." Then turning to Mrs. Grey she said with apologetic pleading, "Oh, Mrs. Grey, Polly wanted to come so badly we just couldn't leave her. You don't mind, do you?" she ended ingratiatingly, and Mrs. Grey

could only smile back indulgently as she climbed into her spring wagon with Uncle Sam beside her.

She had loved the woods all her life and knew just where the smilax grew most abundantly, so after a drive of two or three miles they halted in a beautiful grove upon the bank of a creek. Everywhere the hardy vine wove its lacy beauty. The satiny leaves, veined melon-like and curled a bit at the ends, sprang abundantly from slender stems and overspread the ground, bushes and small trees in riotous profusion.

The children tumbled gaily out of the big wagon, only Gene waiting for Uncle Sam's help. Polly was lifted down last in her cage, squawking, "Polly too, Polly too," which was always her cry when the children were starting anywhere. They hung her cage from a low

limb and she kept up a constant chatter while the children worked.

Soon everybody was busy cutting the long, beautiful sprays of smilax. Even Gene had a pair of scissors, and her little fingers skillfully traced a spray to the main stem or root and clipped industriously like the rest.

"Oh, there is enough smilax here for the whole world," declared Hannie, who always saw things largely.

"What will folks do with it, Mrs. Grey?" asked May.

"They will decorate their houses for Christmas, I suspect, and churches, too, perhaps," she replied.

"And we can send some to the children's hospital, can't we, mother?" asked Gene eagerly.

"I think so," returned Mrs. Grey.
"Little white beds would be very pretty

for Christmas with these vines around them."

"Oh, won't they?" cried Gene. "I can just see them!"

And according to Mrs. Browning:

"Folded eyes see brighter colors than the open ever do."

"And oh, some of it will be for weddings," Gene went on, with certainty, ending fervently, "I do *love* weddings! I wish we could have one at our house."

"Oh, Mrs. Grey," began Hannie, with emphasis, dropping her work for a minute, "you know Sally, the new house girl we had last week. Well, she said one night that our papa might marry just any day! Oh, I was so mad! I didn't believe it, but I asked her who, and she said 'Jes' anybody.' We told her that it wasn't so, —but we were so scared it was that

we couldn't go to sleep. We read a dreadful story about a stepmother once, and we are so afraid of 'em!"

"Stepmother, stepmother," screamed Polly.

Everybody stopped in astonishment, but Hannie exclaimed indignantly, "Yes, that mean Sally taught Polly that, and Mammy Sue sent her flying when she found it out, — she didn't wait for papa to come home." Turning to Polly then, she scolded, "Polly Carter, if you ever say that again, we'll never take you with us anywhere!"

Polly knew she was being seriously rebuked, and looking meekly out of the corner of her eye, said nothing more for quite a time.

After a moment Hannie went on with her story.

"We just lay in bed that night and

cried and cried, and I don't believe we *ever could* have stopped, but at last May said, 'Oh, Hannie, if our papa does marry, he may marry somebody just like Mrs. Grey,' and I was so glad she thought of that, and we turned right over and went to sleep."

It was said with all the frank innocence of childhood, and Mrs. Grey only replied:

"That was dear of you to think of me in so kind a way."

The Carters' man worked with an energy that suggested more than a philanthropic interest in the day's results; old Sam was faithful as usual, and the children worked as well as Mrs. Grey would allow, for she could not let them tire themselves out in her behalf, as they were quite ready to do. The lunch spread on the ground was delicious, the

children had great fun with Polly, and Hannie said when they drove home in the afternoon, with both wagons heaped with smilax, "it had been a beautiful day!"

But Mrs. Grey's mind was very busy, and she could hardly pause for temporary satisfaction. The smilax was firm, would keep for weeks without wilting, it was abundant, and judging from the response to samples already sent, would find ready sale with eastern florists.

In the time intervening between then and Christmas, Eugene Grey & Co. must go into business on a large scale. She must hire hands and teams to gather it for her. She talked with Uncle Sam on the way home.

"Miss Alice, yer knows better'n I do, er cou'se, but I can't see what folks would want'er buy dat stuff fer what I been

tramplin' on all my life. I'se feard dey'll sen' it all back to yer when they gits a good look at it, and hit'll cost a lot o' money to hire all de niggers an' teams you er talkin' 'bout."

"Yes, I know it will take money," said she, respecting his concern, "but I tell you, Uncle Sam, this thing we have thought nothing of, because God has given it to us most abundantly, is a beautiful thing, — I used some of it last night in the library, and parlor, you know, and didn't you see how beautiful it made the rooms?"

"Yas'm, Miss Alice, yas'm. I know you knows mo' 'bout dat den I does," he returned meekly, "an' I'll git de niggers an' de teams, jes' es you say, er hopin' hit'll be all right."

Late as it was, when they reached home, they fell to work packing boxes

with the smilax, Uncle Sam hauled them down to the station, not far away, weighed each one and sent them off that night.

Orders followed this shipment thick and fast, and for the next few weeks Mrs. Grey had scarcely time to think, with the hands and teams to keep occupied to advantage and shipments constantly to make, while, as soon as it became known what she was doing, the schools began to clamor for it for Christmas use. But there was a singing in her heart, as she worked, "My little girl will see, my little girl will see," and she caught Gene up, over and over, with a gay "Hurrah for The Blossom Shop!"

"Another good season like this and I believe I can do it, with the cape jessamine money added two springs more," she assured herself many times a day.

CHAPTER VII

FIRE! FIRE!

THE winter passed quickly and spring came with the cape jessamines again. Mrs. Grey and Gene walked among the long rows of wax-like bushes with a wealth of starry bloom and deep fragrance unfolding about them.

"We can make a fine shipment to-morrow," Mrs. Grey said; "the best we have ever made at the opening of a season. We must have extra help to-morrow," she added, and her voice was so brisk and happy that Gene reflected her joy.

"What do the jessamines whisper now, mother?" she asked.

"Just keep on, just keep on," Mrs. Grey laughed, with rhythmic gaiety.

"I wish I could think just how they look," said the little girl wistfully. "I can think it all except the color; I can't make my fingers feel that."

The mother's throat ached an instant and then she said softly:

"Dearie, I do not know how to make you feel the color except to tell you that it seems to me white, the beautiful jessamine white, is God's color. His throne is called the great white throne, and the angels and all the redeemed in heaven are clothed in white."

The little face suddenly lit up with a radiance that was surely not of earth. "Oh, mother, I know now," she said, stopping and putting her hands together, "for I *know* how God and the angels look!"

How she knew the mother did not question. She stooped and clasped the child in tender reverence.

“Now, mother, what is the green of the leaves like?” Gene went on, turning naturally to the material, without knowing that an instant before she had touched the gleaming heights of faith.

Her mother paused with a swift inward prayer, then, “Green is cool and rugged and heavy,—beautiful too, but it seems only made for the background of beautiful white. There is more green on earth than any other color, and I think it is just to make a strong contrast for the glorious colors of heaven.”

The child listened intently, then thought a moment:

“The sky is blue, and that is the outside of heaven, isn’t it? What is blue like, mother?”

"It is soft and pure and true; I think God made the blue of the sky especially for babies, that they might catch the tint as they come through, for every blessed baby's eyes are blue, and some, like my little Gene, never lose it afterward," she said tenderly.

"Are mine really still like the sky?" the child asked, sweet wonder in her face.

"Yes, dear, very like it," but she did not add, "with a mist of cloud upon it."

The child thought again.

"The stars are little lights in the sky, aren't they, mother?"

"Yes," Mrs. Grey returned, waiting.

"Then babies must get the light for their eyes to see with from the stars, as they come through," Gene said at last; "I wonder why I didn't get one," she ended with a little plaintive note in her

voice. They had seldom talked of her blindness and she had never made the least complaint.

“Oh, darling,” murmured Mrs. Grey, struggling to restrain herself, “I am sure you did get one, — but a bit of a cloud sailing by just then has hidden your little light for a time. Mother feels almost sure that the great doctor in New York will know how to brush the cloud away and let you see like other children.”

“That will be beautiful, beautiful, mother; I have thought about it so much since we went to see the other doctor, and he said I might be made to see some day, — and I am not afraid to see any more, as I was at first. But, mother, I am not afraid never to see, either, if God *really* didn't let me get any little light at all as I came through,” and the small upturned face was so quietly trustful, that though

her heart was breaking, the mother replied as quietly:

“No, dearie, we will not be in the least afraid if God withholds the light.”

They went into the house, a strange foreboding in the mother's heart which she found hard to cast aside. Twilight had fallen, and it was soon Gene's bedtime, and Mrs. Grey rallied her spirits to make it, as usual, a happy hour, succeeding at least in hiding her depression from Gene, who chatted with unusual gaiety about the lot of boxes they would pack to-morrow, and wondered if there would be a baby for every box.

She was asleep at last. Then the depression returned for Mrs. Grey.

Finally, Sunday though it was, she began counting the probabilities of the income from the jessamines for the season. Many bushes were bearing this year that

had not borne before. She got her bank book and added the amount to that already to her credit.

She smiled with pleasure, at last, over the goodly sum, and said to herself, "It is a shame for me to be so mercenary, but another year like this and we can go to New York!"

Just then she heard Uncle Sam from the yard cry out:

"Good Gord A'mighty!" and she hurried in alarm at the frightened tone to the back window of her room.

She did not need to ask why that cry, for the instant shutters were opened she saw great tongues of flame leaping from the sides of the old stable, and excited cries of "Fire! Fire!" with hurrying feet about the house were quickly added to the tale of terror.

CHAPTER VIII

HANNIE'S WICKED WISH

A PASSING cloud, with a gust of wind blowing directly toward the house, and no rain accompanying, fanned the flames from the stable into fury, and in an almost incredible space of time great fiery tongues were reaching out upon the house itself, which was also a frame building. Being almost at an end of the long, straggling street, they were so far from the center of the town with its amateur fire company that help from that source was too late in coming.

Mrs. Grey ran quickly to and fro, gathering up a few priceless things, feeling there was yet time for this, when

Gene started up from sleep with a cry of fright.

"Oh, mother, mother, what is happening? Oh, come to me," she pleaded pitifully, reaching out trembling hands.

"Yes, yes, darling," the mother cried, running to the child. "We are all safe, nothing is going to harm us. The old stable is burning down, that is all." The mother's touch and quiet voice soothed the child instantly, and then Mr. Carter strode into the room without ceremony and stood beside them. Quietly, firmly, he said:

"You must go at once, Alice. Gene, little girl, I am going to wrap you up and carry you right over to Hannie and May."

But the child clung to her mother.

"Yes, mother is going too," said he. "Just bring what you have here, Alice,

— everything will be saved, I think, if we give the firemen right of way here at once,” and his voice was so natural, so cheery, and yet held such a note of authority, that Mrs. Grey did just as he bade her.

Gene clung to both as they passed through the glare, the heat and the excited crowd across the orchard to the Carter house. He pressed the child's head protectingly to him, as he went, while Mrs. Grey kept one little hand in hers, carrying a few treasures in the other.

He took them at once to a large guest-room upon the second floor of his home, and when he had laid the child tenderly down, he turned to Mrs. Grey, whose hand Gene still held tightly.

“Will you trust everything to me?”

“Oh, yes, thank you,” she murmured,

for safety and quiet brought momentary weakness.

Rallying quickly when he was gone, she sat down by the bed talking to Gene cheerily, telling her little stories, — absurd little things she had never thought of before, — while she knew the dear home of her childhood, and the place which held her hope for the sight of her child, was burning to the ground. The room they were in was on the side of the house away from the fire, but the roar and shouts of men reached them sometimes, keeping the little hands in a tension, while the child exclaimed, “Oh, mother, what is it?” again and again.

At last quiet came and Mrs. Grey knew all was over. The child relaxed and fell asleep, then the mother went out.

Mr. Carter was waiting at the door for her; how long he had been standing there she did not know.

Instinctively, she put out a hand as if to parry a blow, and he took it in both of his.

"Alice, we did the best we could for you, but it was little," he said, and his voice was low and a bit unsteady. He waited a moment: "The old home is gone, and the cape jessamines, I am afraid, but we saved everything in the house. The furniture is stored in my stable loft, the china, glassware, linen and pictures are in the dining-room, and the men are waiting now to put your trunks in the attic, if you will show us what you want for immediate use."

He felt this was well for her,—the having some practical things at once to determine.

"You are so good, I can never thank you," she faltered.

Together they went down-stairs to the back door, where stood a half dozen trunks. Mrs. Grey selected two which should go to her room, while the remainder they decided had best go to the attic. A couple of stout negroes who were in waiting carried the two up-stairs, and returning for the others which were to go to the attic, picked up first a big brown trunk which Mrs. Grey recognized instantly as the "mother Grey trunk," as she had always called it.

An unchecked wave of bitterness swept over her for a moment as she saw it, — why could not the worthless thing have been burned, — it would have been such a relief, — and she stepped recklessly forward, her lips parted ready to say, "I don't care anything about that trunk or

what is done with it," then as quickly she pressed them together in the long established habit of restraint and quietly let the men pass on and up the narrow flight of back stairs to the attic.

But it was an awkward as well as a narrow passage, the men were tired, and a misstep from one of them jerked the trunk from the hands of the other and sent it reeling down the steps.

Mr. Carter sprang forward, and broke its fall at the bottom, preventing any possible danger to Mrs. Grey, but the recurring blows against the narrow stairway wall had broken the hinges of the trunk.

"Now, men, that was very careless," he exclaimed, much annoyed that any harm should come to Mrs. Grey's belongings while under his roof.

"It does not matter in the least," pro-

tested Mrs. Grey with a vigor that made Mr. Carter look up at her inquiringly. And, as she did not stoop to restore some bulging garments at the back (for she did not feel at the moment that she could bring herself to touch them), he awkwardly replaced them himself, pushed the lid tightly down and instructed the men to take it up again with extreme care.

Had he looked into Alice Grey's face as he did so, he would have been amazed at the strange, almost mocking light in her usually gentle eyes while, with head erect, she watched that trunk being borne up-stairs and wished from the depths of her heart it might somehow be dashed into oblivion.

But he did not look at her until the trunks had all been safely taken up and stored away, then turning to her, he found

her face only very tired and worn, and said cheerily:

“Now, Mammy Sue has something hot for us to eat and drink,” and he led her into the quiet library, where a little table had been spread with hot milk, hot coffee and sandwiches. It was after twelve o’clock, a new day was about to begin, — a new day indeed.

They discussed the fire and Mr. Carter said it was the general opinion that somebody had slipped into the barn, probably for the night, had smoked and set fire to it. Then he turned to Mammy Sue, who stood nearby, her plump form clad in the customary neat, dark dress, with apron and head-kerchief of spotless white, all undisturbed by the night’s happenings, — quiet, energetic, capable as usual.

“Mammy, where are Hannie and May?” he asked.

He had left them in her care when they all ran home from church at the cry of fire, and knew they would be safe in her hands.

"I got Miss May to sleep a while ago, but Miss Hannie's in de parlor, Mars John. I can't make out what's the matter wid her; she wouldn't look at the fire, and ain' done nothin' but cry lack her heart done broke."

"She is a very tender-hearted child," said Mr. Carter, "I guess this has all been too much for her. I will go and see about her," but before he could rise from his seat, Hannie ran in and threw herself down at Mrs. Grey's feet, sobbing out:

"Oh, Mrs. Grey, I burned your house down, — but I didn't mean to, — I love you and Gene just like I do papa and May, and *that* wasn't what I wanted!"

It was so incoherent and the sobs so

tragic that both Mrs. Grey and Mr. Carter felt alarmed.

"Why, Hannie, darling," exclaimed Mrs. Grey, soothing the child with eager kindness, "*you* did not burn my house!"

"Oh, but I *did*! I was so wicked, you don't know," she cried, between sobs again.

Then Mr. Carter picked her up from the floor in his arms, smoothed her hair gently, and said steadily:

"Now, daughter, tell us all about it. What did you burn Mrs. Grey's house with, a match or a firecracker, — but I forget it is not Fourth of July or Christmas, and you are not a boy."

The bit of humor helped to steady her, and after a moment she sat up and told them all about it:

"I went to church with papa," the shaking voice began, "and oh, I got so

sleepy I couldn't stay awake. I just thought I'd *die*, I was so sleepy," she said tragically, "and I began to wish something would happen to make church stop. I just wished for a big fire, or anything dreadful that would stop church and let me go home. Then the fire-bells rang and everybody was excited and stopped church sure enough, and, and, — it was Mrs. Grey's house I got burned down! You see I had really prayed for the fire," she ended in a whisper.

There was a pause that was almost tragic with suppressed mirth, for Mr. Carter looked at Mrs. Grey, his eyes a-twinkle, and she in quick reaction, which is so easy after excitement, could hardly control herself. But Mr. Carter's voice kept steady.

"Well, now, daughter, that was not quite right, to wish something to burn

down, so as to get you out of the church, because you were so dreadfully sleepy, but I am sure that God did not answer your prayer by burning Mrs. Grey's house, for I am pretty certain the spark dropped in the old stable before you even got sleepy."

Hannie had the utmost confidence in her father and the burden of trouble rolled from her young heart instantly.

"Dearest papa, I am so glad, so glad, and I will never make a wicked wish like that again, if I just *die*," she declared fervently.

Mr. Carter and Mrs. Grey allowed themselves unrestrained laughter at this, which did them all good, and Hannie in happy reaction said:

"Oh, papa, we will keep Mrs. Grey and Gene always now, won't we? And then I can make up for my wicked wish

by showing them every day how I love them."

"Yes, indeed, daughter," Mr. Carter returned gently.



CHAPTER IX

A BLOSSOM SPARED

WHEN the house was at last quiet, everyone having lain down to rest, if not to sleep, Mammy Sue marshalled the housemaids, declaring she "wan' gwine to leave her dinin'-room lack dat," and with her efficient generalship they stored all Mrs. Grey's china, silver and glass-ware in the pantries, which were at that season comparatively empty of the winter stores of preserves, pickles and jellies. The family portraits belonging to Mrs. Grey were arranged around the walls on the floor and everything put in comfortable order for breakfast to be served later.

It was quite late indeed when the household gathered for the morning meal.

Mrs. Grey's feet were weighted when she tried to rise, for she had not slept, and despair had tugged constantly at her heart. Where should she go? What should she do? It would probably take every cent she had saved to locate anew. There had been no insurance on the house, for it had not seemed possible that fire could ever reach the quiet old place, and she had felt that she could not well spare the money from her fund to keep up the dues.

It would be impossible to wait for cape jessamines to grow again, while she sat idle; she must find something else to do. These thoughts, with the old bitter ones freshly astir, kept up a ceaseless weary round, which even the night ecstasy of a

nearby mocking bird could not break, till, with the depression of early morning hours, her brain was numb. When the sun streamed in and Gene started up in bed at last, fear and excitement springing upon her waking heart like lingering spirits of the night's terror, it required all the mother's strength and will to keep her touch steady and her voice reassuring for those sensitive little ears.

"Mother, is it all so? Is our house gone, all gone, and the cape jessamines too?"

"Yes, sweetheart, it is all true."

"What are we going to do, mother?" queried the child in an awed voice.

"Oh, we won't try to say before breakfast," returned Mrs. Grey with a wan attempt at gaiety, which only made the small hands tighten their grasp of hers.

"Mother will plan everything, darling, pretty soon; you need not be afraid," she ended desperately, reaching out for hope and courage, and succeeding so well that the little one relaxed, in the habitual, perfect trust of her mother. So it was that Mrs. Grey went bravely down to breakfast to talk over all the details of the previous night with cheerful interest which betrayed not in the least the night's despair. Mr. Carter seated her opposite himself at the table, seemingly as a matter-of-course courtesy, but Uncle Sam, looking in at the dining-room door during the meal, drew back smiling, and encountering Mammy Sue a moment later, he chuckled:

"Anybody kin see dat he's mighty satisfied wid her a-settin' at de head er his table."

"Go 'long wid yer," sharply reprim-

manded Mammy Sue. "Yer can't think er nothin' but folks gittin' married," she added with a scornful significance that suggested a possibility that the subject of matrimony had been warmly and probably unsuccessfully discussed by the two at some previous time.

Uncle Sam went off at this, and his smile soon faded, while he muttered to himself:

"I shorely wishes she'd stay dar, kase I mought drap off sometime. I feels mighty lack it dis mornin', an' den who's gwine ter tek care on her?" he ended wearily. Sighing, he went on: "She ain' gwine ter do it, though he been wantin' her dis long time, — yer can't fool me, but her head's dess as high up as ever. She's feared little Miss Gene mought be a burden ter him. I knows her." And he shook his head gloomily

as he sat down on the cabin door-steps to wait till Miss Alice was through breakfast.

Finally she came out alone, Hannie and May having taken possession of Gene, and faced the ruins of her beloved home, as she did so, the blackened chimneys standing like grim spectres on guard, and Uncle Sam's cabin the only building remaining.

The old darky still sat dejectedly on the door-steps, his head down, and did not see his mistress till she stood before him.

Then he started clumsily up at sight of her pale, quivering face, and it was all she could do to keep from throwing herself into the old negro's arms and sobbing out her despair.

He reached his hands toward her an instant, and then seeing her steady her-

self against the door-frame, he remarked in a matter-of-fact way:

“I thought I’d jes’ clean up the litter ’round the ole place ter-day, Miss Alice; dey certainly did tromple things pretty bad las’ night.”

She looked at him gratefully, and replied:

“All right, Uncle Sam, do whatever you think best to-day. I know you must be tired from last night; don’t try to do too much. I guess I am tired too, for I can’t seem to think much yet.”

“Co’s’e you is, honey,” said the old man with irrepressible tenderness, “an’ don’t you worry none, Miss Alice, ’cause we’s goin’ ter git erlong all right.”

Then she went into the house and up to her room in an effort to think composedly for awhile before friends began to come in, for she knew they would

flock about her when the early hours were passed, and there would be homes opened to her without number, to some one of which she must go temporarily, for it would not do, she felt, to remain long where she was.

But when Mammy Sue came up an hour later to announce callers she found Mrs. Grey suffering intolerably with headache, and gently put her to bed as she would have done a sick child.

Mrs. Grey was not subject to headaches, which made the throbbing pain all the harder to bear. She could do nothing but obey the wise old Mammy, and thought was impossible for the time.

The children were kept away and the competent negress used simple restoratives, but by noon there was no relief, and when Mr. Carter came in for lunch and learned the state of things, he sent

at once for Mrs. Grey's physician. The doctor ordered perfect quiet, lest brain fever develop, and though friends continued to call, no one saw her for several days. The rebelling head did not yield to treatment for two days, and then the patient lay white and spent for two days more.

Mr. Carter chafed under the conventionality which denied him the right to go and minister to her, even as he would have done to his own sister. But for her sake he did not enter the sick-room, though he often noiselessly paced the floor just outside.

Hannie and May did not need his admonitions to keep Gene occupied and interested, but devoted themselves to the little girl every moment, Hannie still with a somewhat contrite heart, for she could not forget that *awful* wish.

They played all sorts of games, they rode old Queen, with Uncle Sam in faithful attendance, they frolicked with the parrot, they read stories, but nevertheless the small shut-in world of the little sightless child was reeling. The hills no longer untied their bonnets, the bobolinks were gone from the mornings, and the little yellow boys and girls had left the purple sunset stile. Gene had never known her mother to be sick before, and her life-anchor was beyond reach in that strange, quiet sick-room. She also missed the touch of dear doors and furniture, and though familiar with the Carter house for happy visiting times, it was not a part of her being, like the old home. When she tried to take a step alone, fear clutched her little heart.

She asked on the second day that she might sit by mother just a little and hold

her hand. "I will not say a word," she said with pathetic intensity, and the pain being somewhat less, Mrs. Grey begged too that she might come for a little while.

When Mammy Sue finally parted the clinging fingers she led the little girl to the next room, where Hannie and May were waiting for her.

"May, you and Gene play 'Hull-gull,'" said Hannie.

"Goody, goody," cried May, dancing away for the beans they used for the game, and then dividing them equally between herself and Gene.

"You first, Gene," directed Hannie, and Gene obediently turned her back while she selected a part of her store which she doubled up in her little fist, and then began the usual:

"Hull-gull."

"Hand full," cried May, in gay response.

"How many," said Gene.

After long deliberation and elaborate efforts to peek into the closed fist, May guessed, "Five!"

Gene opened her hand then, and showed only one small bean in the palm.

"Give me four to make it so," she said.

Then it was May's time to choose a few of her beans, double her fist and cry, "Hull-gull," to which Gene returned the "Hand full," and May came back with the gay question, "How many?" But there was no excited "peeking" this time, as there usually was by the clever little sensitive fingers, and the guess of "nine," was simply mechanical, but it proved to be just the correct number of beans which May's hand held, and so they were all turned over to the success-

ful little guesser, with much make-believe mourning on the part of May, and gay clapping of hands from Hannie.

But Gene could not enter joyfully into the loved game which she usually played with so much zest, and seeing this, the girls looked at her disconsolately, then May brightened with a sudden happy thought.

“Let’s go to the stable and see the puppies!”

And taking Gene by the hands, the two children led her away to see two roly, poly gray puppies which were a late and most interesting acquisition. Nobody could resist Spot and Dot! When they were down-stairs they found that the puppies had been brought to the woodshed back of the kitchen, being now strong enough to leave their bed in the stable and take a more active part in life.

The delight of the children was great over this, but the next instant they were filled with consternation to see Polly with ruffled feathers standing beside them.

“Oh, she will scratch their eyes out!” cried Hannie. “Who did let you come here?” she scolded, turning to the parrot.

But Polly was a much privileged character, and bridling, she squawked, “My pups, my pups!”

The children laughed delightedly at this, and Uncle Sam, appearing at the door, said, “Wait and see what she gwine do. I ain’ gwine let her hurt um.”

So Hannie and May watched breathlessly.

Polly waddled close to the two puppies, continuing to say in soft, crooning fashion, “My pups, my pups,” while she gently took in her beak a bit of hair upon

the back of one and caressingly rubbed her throat upon his soft coat!

"Oh! Oh!" exclaimed Hannie and May together.

"She loves them," declared Hannie at last, and stooping, she put her arms about Gene and told her the wonderful news of how Polly had adopted the puppies when they had been so afraid to even let her see them lest she put their eyes out or hurt them in some way!

But the exciting tale brought only a wan smile to Gene's face.

Uncle Sam looked at her in quick alarm, and said peremptorily:

"You all go on out in de sunshine, I's gwine to put Polly in her cage now."

And Hannie and May, feeling the little girl's depression indefinitely, took her by the hand and led her aimlessly out.

Suddenly Gene stood still, dropped their hands and clasping hers, cried with quivering lips, "I want to go home. Please take me there!"

"Oh, Gene," begged Hannie, distressed, "don't go over there."

Somehow the happy, care-free girl knew that there would be peculiar pain for the little blind child if she went among the ruins, and they had kept away, when curiosity under ordinary conditions would have led them there.

"But," opposed Gene, setting the quivering lips in new, strangely strong lines, "I must find out what 'burned up' means. I've just got to know," she added tensely.

The children protested no longer, but led her over to the old place.

"Here is where the house was," said Hannie, stopping, and Gene stooped

down, touching the soft ashes timidly but with determination, again and again. Then she stood and thought, her small, pathetic face a mystery to the children.

At last she spoke, reaching for Hannie's hand:

"Take me where our room was," and the children found the corner of the house where Mrs. Grey and Gene had slept. Next they hunted out the parlor, then the library, the porches, the dining-room, etc., going all around the ruins many times, Hannie and May trying to fit the various apartments into what now seemed a very small space, and Gene touched each tall chimney with trembling fingers.

Then she said, "I want to see the cape jessamines now." They led her to the charred and blackened bushes and she dropped the children's guiding hands.

She put out her own, as she was wont to do when hunting blossoms, and at the first touch of shriveled, charred stubs, she drew back with a quick, frightened sob.

Hannie stopped instantly. "Oh, Gene, don't touch them. I can't bear to have you," she pleaded.

"But I must," declared the child with that strange firmness again, which held them in awe.

Again the little groping hands went out, this time more determinedly, and they followed persistently, row after row of ruined shrubs. At last, as she stooped and felt beneath a large bush near the gate, she gave a joyful cry, and her face was transformed.

"I have found one," cried the courageous little head of the old firm, and her fingers indeed clung to the stem of a wee

blossom, which had escaped the scorching heat.

White and beautiful it was, and joyfully Hannie broke the stem for her.

"I will take this to mother, and she will see they are not all burned up. Then she won't feel so bad," cried the child, reacting in a transport of delight.

The hearts of the little friends bounded with hers and together they went, joyfully, back to the Carter home.

Mammy Sue let them all in for a moment, seeing their happy faces at the door.

Relief from suffering had come to Mrs. Grey in the last hour, and when she saw the perfect starry white blossom in Gene's hand, it seemed a messenger of hope, and grateful tears filled her eyes, even before the radiant little girl eagerly proclaimed:

"Oh, mother, they are not all dead; here is a dear baby blossom to tell us they will bloom again." They had always had much pretty sentiment about the jessamines. They had told the last blossom good-by each year, and welcomed, joyfully, the first newcomer as the little white herald of a glad return.

"We can have our Blossom Shop again," she ended in ecstatic climax.

"Yes, they are truly alive, some," put in Hannie quickly, "but you will stay here with us anyway, won't you, Mrs. Grey?" she ended anxiously, feeling that if the cape jessamines were really alive it might somehow take the two she loved away again.

Mrs. Grey smiled weakly and said, indefinitely, but warmly, "You are a dear girl to want us to stay."

Gossip rarely tainted the quiet refine-

ment of that little old college town where the Greys and the Carters lived, and Mammy Sue jealously guarded the ears of her young charges, so Hannie little thought there might be impropriety in Mrs. Grey's remaining there, while marriage between their father and the woman they loved so dearly was an undreamed-of possibility for the innocent children.

CHAPTER X

THE BROKEN - HINGED TRUNK

THINGS were brighter after this. Gene watched by the hour through Hannie and May's excited exclamations while Polly strutted about her pups, as she continued to call them, having taken complete possession of Dot and Spot, who, in turn, accepted her with great serenity. She scolded and petted them with all the privilege of motherhood, and the children thought they had never found anything so funny.

Two days passed happily, and then Mrs. Grey, having grown much stronger, was sitting upon the long front piazza when Mr. Carter came home in the eve-

ning. She was alone and his face lit up with pleasure at the sight of her, looking more beautiful in her frailty, he thought, than she had ever done in her buoyant strength. Striding up the steps he stood before her, letting his eyes say what was denied touch or speech.

Then, looking about inquiringly, he asked: "Where are the children?"

"With the parrot and the puppies," she smiled.

"Of course," he exclaimed, laughing heartily. "I might have known it." Then, turning to her again, his face grew sober with tender yearning.

"Forgive me, Alice, but God has sent you and Gene to me, — don't you see?" he said at last.

Her face quivered an instant, then she returned brokenly:

"No, no, John, you are wrong. I do

not understand why this dreadful thing happened, but it does not change anything, except to make it harder for me to do as you wish."

He looked down upon her a moment more, his face full of sudden pain, for he had hoped, believed, she might come to him in her desolation. Then he turned without a word and went in.

Next day, as Mrs. Grey moved about her room, trying to gather strength to take up the problem of her life, at least enough to make immediate plans, Hannie and May came running in with Gene between them.

"Oh, Mrs. Grey," began Hannie, "won't you please let us dress up in some of the old things you've got in your trunks in our attic? The puppies are asleep and Polly scolds if we wake them up, so we want to play lady. We've

dressed up in our old things so many times, we are tired of them all, — it's no fun any more."

Mrs. Grey thought a moment.

"Why, yes, Hannie," she said, "there is an old trunk up there with broken hinges; it is locked and the key is gone, but you can lift the lid from the back. You can get anything you want from it and dress up in them if you like."

"Oh, thank you," cried Hannie, and they all scampered away in high glee, for dressing in grown-up things and "playing lady" was the dearest play they knew.

Up the stairs they flew and began at once examining the hinges of Mrs. Grey's trunks.

"Oh, here's the one," cried May, and Hannie, running to her, found she had indeed reached the trunk with broken

hinges. They lifted the lid from the back, and taking out some things, exclaimed "Oh! Oh!" in delight, for they were very nice, and promised wonderful possibilities.

"I'll wear this velvet dress and be a queen," announced Hannie.

"And I'm going to wear this silk, and be a princess," cried May.

Then Hannie stopped a minute in doubt. "But, I don't believe we ought to take the very nicest things; Mrs. Grey might want them some time."

Gene stood by, looking a little puzzled, but she said at last:

"You know mother told us we could have anything in it," and so they selected what pleased them, but Hannie finally decided to forego being queen because velvet was so hot, and chose a simple house-gown of soft material.

Gene had only a skirt on, she was so little, and it was tucked deeply in at the waist in front so she could step, but trailed most beautifully behind, as did both Hannie's and May's dresses, while they held them up in front.

They all minced around delightedly, called upon one another and went to parties. Hannie found a pocket in her gown and frequently drew her handkerchief out or replaced it with great daintiness. Finally she noticed a folded paper in the pocket, and drawing it out, spread it open with natural curiosity:

"To Mrs. Eugene Grey," it began.

"Oh, this is something of Mrs. Grey's; maybe she's forgotten she ever put it here," said Hannie. "Let's take it to her," and the three went tripping down stairs with as much speed as their long trains would permit.

Mrs. Grey looked up in astonishment, when they came frisking in.

"Why, children, what have you been into?" she said bewildered, the finery in which they were arrayed being totally unknown to her.

"Why, just the trunk with the broken hinges, like you told us," replied Hannie, forgetting the paper for a moment.

"I don't understand," said Mrs. Grey. "The trunk I meant was an old green trunk with broken hinges."

"This wasn't a green trunk," admitted Hannie slowly; "it was brown, — but it had broken hinges, just as you said."

"Yes'm, it did," declared May earnestly, "and we opened it from the back."

"A brown trunk, — why, that must have been Mother Grey's trunk," Mrs. Grey said, a light dawning upon her, as

she looked again at the strange garments. "I remember now, — the hinges were broken the night of the fire," she concluded, finally solving the whole mystery.

Then Hannie, relieved, thought of the paper she had found in the pocket.

"Oh, Mrs. Grey, see," she said, "here is a letter which I got out of the pocket in this dress. I opened it before I thought what it might be, and it's yours."

Mrs. Grey took it in bewildered surprise, and the revelation of the first few lines made her sink weak and trembling in a chair.

"Go, children," she managed to say, "go on and play."

They turned away wondering, but as she summoned a smile when they looked back from the door, they went off happily.

When alone she spread the paper out upon her lap and tried to take in the contents.

“TO MRS. EUGENE GREY,” it read:

“I shall soon stand before the bar of God and to die in peace, I must acknowledge that I treated my son with undue harshness, and that I have been unjust to you and your child. My last will and testament, which I shall this night dictate to my beloved wife (who is alone with me in these, my dying hours) will make some amends to you and your child.

“Your father,

“JAMES GREY.”

Upon another sheet folded with it, was the will, all written in the delicate, precise handwriting of her husband's mother which she remembered so well, and

signed by James Grey in an uncertain but legible hand.

The will gave and bequeathed half of his estate to his wife and half to his son's wife and child to be held by the said son's wife and child jointly. Upon the death of his wife the entire estate would revert to his son's wife and child unless the wife should die or contract a second marriage, when it would revert entirely to the child. In the event of the early death of all three a fund for charitable purposes was to be created. His sister he omitted from any bequest with the statement that she was already abundantly provided for. Both documents bore the date of the death of Mr. and Mrs. James Grey.

Mrs. Grey read and re-read it, trying to grasp the full meaning. The language was so simple it could not be misunderstood, and the incidents of her father-in-

law's sudden death, and his wife's immediately following as she knelt beside him alone, on that last tragic night, made everything very clear. The brief letter and will had evidently been thrust in the pocket of her gown when written, as she turned to minister to him in his last moments, and ere aid came to them, she, too, had passed into the great beyond with the letter and will lying unsuspected in her pocket.

A will written some years before had been probated, which left his entire estate to his sister, Martha Grey, and she, conscientiously following the wishes of her brother as then expressed, had only felt free to send the trunk full of clothing belonging to her sister-in-law, whom she felt would have been glad to have all she possessed go to her son's wife and child, and along the hidden paths of providence

that act was to bring to Mrs. Grey and her child possession of the estate. Hours of tumultuous thought followed the discovery of this final act of love and justice, but when Mr. Carter came home to lunch Mrs. Grey met him in the library and composedly laid the papers before him, telling how they had fallen into her hands.

"Alice," he said quietly, and with deep regret, when he had gone over the papers carefully, "you ought to have the money, I do not doubt, but I am afraid you cannot win a suit with that paper before any court."

"But I do not believe I shall have to sue," she returned quickly. She had thought it all out. "Eugene always said," she went on earnestly, "that his Aunt Martha was the soul of justice and honor; if she is shown these papers,

which she will know to be genuine, she will at once relinquish all claims."

She asked Mr. Carter to be her attorney and go at once north with the papers. He agreed to do so, never showing by word or look before he left that he felt anything but a business interest in the matter. They decided to tell the children nothing until his return, and Mr. Carter smiled as he said:

"Hannie will feel entirely forgiven for that wicked prayer if it comes about that the burning down of your house was the indirect means of bringing to you and Gene your lawful inheritance."

"I doubt if that letter had ever come to light but for this," said Mrs. Grey. "I planned when Gene was grown to open the trunk with her; but it is probable, if we ever did, we would only have looked in and closed it again, because I

should always have felt that the clothes Mother Grey had worn were too sacred to handle, — and I am afraid there was too much bitterness in my heart against Father Grey and Aunt Martha,” she added honestly.

There was silence a moment, and then, her sweet face flushing and eyes shining, she turned to him and put out her hand. “You and yours have always brought me good,” she said softly.

But he took no advantage of her mood. She was a rich woman now, or soon would be, he sternly reminded himself, and that put things upon an entirely different footing. Besides, should she marry, it would mean the forfeiture of her part of the inheritance. No, he would never rob her of anything. All hope was ended for him.

CHAPTER XI

AWAY UP NORTH

MRS. GREY proved to be entirely correct in her unprejudiced estimate of the character of her husband's aunt, Miss Martha Grey. When Mr. Carter laid the letter and will before the prim, conscientious, self-restrained New England lady, telling the circumstances of their discovery, she said at once:

"That is undoubtedly the handwriting of my sister-in-law. That is the signature of my brother James." Then she paused a moment, her lips set and black eyes clear and steady:

"The documents are genuine," she went on, with her high sense of honor.

unshaken, "and my only wish is to carry out the last will and testament of my brother James. The property shall be, without delay, turned over to the widow and child of my nephew, Eugene Grey. I, of course, have received the income from the estate for the past five years. I will at once make out a check for the full amount of this, and send to her so that she may come into immediate possession of her rightful dues in part, and that I may make reparation for the unintentional injustice done her, as speedily as possible."

Mr. Carter was amazed at such rapid thinking and such prompt recognition of the rights of others, when such rights meant great financial loss, for he did not know integrity in its Puritanical rigidity. But with this expeditious thinking and complete restitution his business

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north was soon accomplished, and he returned to Alabama without delay to send Mrs. Grey and Gene on at once to sign papers and complete the transfer.

When the good news was told on his return, Gene danced in happy bewilderment because mother kissed her gaily many times a day. Hannie and May would have been happy too in the good fortune of their loved friends, but it was going to take those dear friends away, and father looked so grave and still all the time.

Uncle Sam was soon turning over in his hands a goodly sum of money, more than he had ever possessed before, and wondering if that marvelous story could all be really true.

"An' me an' Miss Alice ain' gotter scuffle no mo'?" he said to himself inquiringly. He couldn't quite pin his

faith to such Utopian dreams, and he finally buried most of his allowance carefully one dark night, lest Miss Alice find out that she needed money after all.

• But with Miss Martha Grey's check for a very large sum at her immediate disposal, the days of financial struggle had really vanished like a summer cloud for Mrs. Grey, and she and Gene boarded a train for the north with every comfort within their reach just three weeks from the time Hannie's little wicked prayer had gone up and the old home had disappeared in a whirl of flame and smoke, leaving them desolate. The hills again untied their bonnets and the bobolinks began each morning, while little yellow boys and girls climbed the purple stile at sunset.

As they drew near their destination after an uneventful journey, Mrs. Grey

was very grateful that she had planted no bitterness in the heart of her child, and again and again she told all the happy things which her husband had talked about concerning his home and dear ones.

They arrived at last without mishap at the bustling little New England city of Eugene Grey's boyhood, and appeared one sparkling June morning at the old Grey homestead of almost a century's standing. Both hearts beat quickly, Mrs. Grey's with anxious uncertainty, which she carefully concealed from the child, and Gene's with eager, undefined expectation.

It was a square, somber-looking house before which they stood, with an iron railing enclosing its formal front grass plot. The door-bell sounded far away when Mrs. Grey touched it, and they waited

long before the stately butler ushered them in. The stillness of death seemed to fall upon them as they entered a parlor whose rich dark furnishings looked equally funereal and imposing. Gene clutched her mother's hand with instinctive fear while the two waited in breathless silence.

At last from down the long hall Gene's quick ears caught the sound of soft foot-falls, her face lit up with eager expectancy again, and a moment later Miss Martha Grey was before them, tall, slender, erect, with white hair put smoothly back from a somewhat long face, which was not old for a woman of fifty, but the keen dark eyes had lacked the sparkle of laughter even in youth, one instinctively felt, and the muscles about the mouth had become fixed in sober, austere lines. With all her Puritan re-

serve upon her she extended her hand stiffly to her nephew's widow, and then turning to Gene, she stood a moment transfixed. Before her was a little fairy child faultlessly dressed, with soft light curls framing a sweet face over which emotion played like flickering sunbeams over a June rose, sensitive little fingers outstretching to greet dear auntie, who mother said had been so good to them, — and with the suddenness of magic the starved maiden heart melted into warm, tender, beautiful womanhood with its inherent motherliness. She knelt before the child, in whose veins flowed the same blood as hers, and taking it in her arms showered her long hidden tenderness in soft kisses upon the fair brow, and sweet lips, while the little arms twined about the woman's neck in loving response.

Shaken in a way she had never been be-

fore in all her self-contained life, Miss Grey rose at last, and still holding the child's hand, turned to the mother and said unsteadily:

"I thank God I can make restitution to this dear child."

This was not at all what she had intended to say. She had meant to do her duty by these aliens, giving them their full rights, but, at the same time, from her Puritan heights of rectitude, she had intended to confine her dealings to business, and, if possible, to impress upon them a sense of their obligations and responsibility. But what heart could resist that helpless, beautiful child?

She regained her composure through a little talk of business with Gene's hand still in her own, and at last said, with conventional courtesy which held something of authority:

"You must remain here with me while you stay."

"Oh, no," said Alice Grey, quickly and firmly, "we cannot think of disturbing you; we have rooms at the hotel."

"Oh, mother," put in Gene pleadingly, "I want to stay here with my father's Aunt Martha!"

Amazed at the choice of the child, which would mean acceptance of hospitality from the main object of her years of bitterness, Mrs. Grey was speechless for a moment, and Miss Martha, with a little happy light of triumph on her austere face which would have astonished all her acquaintances, said:

"I couldn't allow you to stay elsewhere. I will call a maid to show you to your rooms and send a man for your luggage."

So they were most unexpectedly installed in the home of Miss Martha Grey, and while every courtesy was shown them, it was the formal courtesy one shows a stranger so far as Alice Grey was concerned, and she would have speedily terminated her stay on some pretext but for the amazing fact that Gene with the mysterious skill of childhood kept herself in perfect attune with the austere woman, and her mother, remembering the close tie of blood between them, was constrained by something intuitive to bide time's developments.

But after a few days the prim stateliness of the house oppressed her and she could see that Gene felt it too. They had been very busy at first, and then came a wait while papers were being prepared and investigations made. Miss Grey was not accustomed to so much going out as

this had necessitated and was glad of the pause. She felt, doubtless, that her guests should be equally relieved.

Gene had begun from the first to try to learn the highways and by-paths of the house, but the more she tried the more the stillness, the shut-in air frightened her, while the distant, silent attitude of the servants was depressing, and she wanted to hold her mother's or Miss Martha's hand all the time. She soon ate almost nothing, saying plaintively when she was urged, "Please, I am not hungry."

Miss Martha, with a tender solicitude that was entirely new to her, had many dainty things prepared, but the child would only say, "I am so sorry, Aunt Martha, but I cannot eat."

When she awakened in the morning she would ask instantly with a little

frightened voice, "Mother, where is home?"

"Home, darling, is just where we left it," Mrs. Gray would reply cheerily, and then talk about what they were doing down in old Alabama just then.

"Mammy Sue is combing Hannie's and May's hair," she would say, or, "They are just getting up," or, "still asleep," and then the hills would untie their bonnets and the bobolinks begin merrily as of old, while the old bright look came back to her little face. But as they went down-stairs the child would clutch her mother's hand, and then cling to Aunt Martha in her morning greeting with a pathetic eagerness that wrung that self-contained woman's heart, while it bound her to the child with a perfect abandon of tenderness.

She soon came to exchange looks with

Mrs. Grey which said plainly, "the child is homesick," and this womanly understanding could not fail to bring closer the two of alien blood. They worked together to divert the little one, but with poor success. The servants, too, recognizing a change of conditions in the household, and having been greatly attracted to the helpless child with her gentle, sweet ways, gave her kindest attention. But, in spite of all, the small face grew daily, almost hourly, white and thin with the quick change that is always possible with children. At last one morning the child said wearily:

"I am so tired, mother, I cannot get up." Mrs. Grey's heart stood still. Anxiously she called Miss Martha and the two women hovered over the little bed, no longer aliens, but one in distressed sympathy and interest.

"We must have the doctor at once," said Miss Martha, hurrying from the room to call him.

No one thought of breakfast; the servants tiptoed here and there in frightened awe as they saw Miss Martha's face, and the household held its breath, so to speak, until the doctor came.



CHAPTER XII

DR. MURTON

DR. MURTON had been the Greys' family physician for many years. He was a bachelor of portly build, with an abundant shock of iron-gray hair and an unruly white forelock above keen, gray-blue eyes and a sternly marked face which broke readily upon occasion into radiant good humor with astonishing transformation. Big, blustering he was, yet very kindly, and a great lover of children.

Up the stairs he came with vigor yet lightness of step, his entire personality being a combination of contrasts.

"Well, well, what have we here!" he exclaimed, as he entered the room, then

sat down beside the child, took the listless little hand and passed it caressingly over his face.

"Why, it is a little southern johnny-jump-up that's turned to a snow-drop up here in the cold north," he ran on, with a certain tender quality in his voice, as he felt her pulse and examined her carefully, which won her heart at once.

"Didn't they tell me your name was Johnny?" he asked then teasingly.

"No, — Eugene," answered a weak little voice while a wan smile crept into the white face.

"Well, well, I made a mistake, didn't I? But we like johnny-jump-ups better than we do snow-drops, and we must have you up and prancing about before a cat can wink her eye."

"I know the very thing that will do it," he went on, rapidly writing a prescrip-

tion and bringing another wan smile as he ordered 'possum and sweet 'taters for her dinner.

But out in the hall he told Miss Martha that the child, he feared, was in a quite serious state of nervous collapse.

"Homesickness is part of it, but not all," he said. "Give her all the sunlight you can, — never mind fading carpets, — and I can tell better to-morrow. We must bring about a prompt reaction," he ended as he hurried out.

Next morning he came early and found everything flooded with sunshine in the gloomy old house. As he sat down by Gene's bed he bantered her a little about not having "jumped up yet," and pretended great surprise that she hadn't made her dinner the previous day from 'possum and sweet 'taters as he had told her.

This time her smile was hardly a little ghost, and with the pretense of getting her something himself worth while to eat, he beckoned Mrs. Grey to go out with him, while Miss Martha remained with the child.

"Has the little girl had a nervous shock of any kind recently?" he inquired at once.

"Why, no," Mrs. Grey answered slowly, "unless it was the fire," she added.

"Fire?" returned the doctor sharply. "Tell me about it," and he drew her to a window-seat in the hall.

Mrs. Grey told him anxiously all about the burning of their old home and her subsequent illness, so she had hardly noticed the effect on the child.

The doctor nodded his head understandingly.

“And then she came up here through the darkness into this tomb,” he said to himself. Aloud, “I think she felt the shock of that fire more than you knew perhaps, and then coming to a new world, with a complete change of climate and surroundings, has been rather hard on her.”

“Shall I take her right back?” asked Mrs. Grey eagerly.

“No, hardly just now,” he replied slowly, then considered a moment. “Has she anybody at home that she thinks a great deal of who could come to her,—as a sort of assurance of the reality and continued existence of that world she and you have left?”

“Why, yes,” returned Mrs. Grey, greatly troubled, “I have several friends who could come.”

“All right,” said the doctor cheerily,

"we'll go back and ask her whom she would like to have come to see her from home, and watch the effect upon her."

"But, doctor," Mrs. Grey began deprecatingly, "we can't ask anybody to come here —"

"I'll fix that," broke in the doctor before she could finish, and he hurried back to the child's bedside, Mrs. Grey anxiously following.

"Well, now," he exclaimed cheerily, sitting down by Gene, "I've ordered cracklin' bread and chincapins for your dinner, — you see, I have traveled south and I know what wee southern girls like."

The little ghost-smile came out as the child replied weakly, "We don't have chincapins in the summer, or cracklin' bread either."

"Is that so? What a blunderer I am! Well, you'll get things just as good any way, this time, sure. And now I want to tell you something," and he took a little hand in each of his, "I have found out from — well, the fairies, — that you can have anybody to come to see you from home that you want! Now tell us, whom do you want?"

A sudden flickering light broke over the sweet face and the doctor felt the little hands tremble.

"Tell us," he urged, "just whom you want."

"I want," she began slowly, at last, "I want Hannie to come, and May, and Mr. Carter, and Uncle Sam," the little voice growing stronger with each name, "and Mammy Sue, and, — and the parrot and the puppies," till the last was a glad cry.

The doctor leaned back, laughing heartily, and then exclaimed:

"All right, we'll have them here before you know it, every single one of them, not a parrot or a puppy left out!" and he laughed again uncontrollably, while Mrs. Grey protested in consternation:

"Oh, Gene, darling, you do not want so many!"

"Yes, mother, I do," she said with energy she had not shown for a week, "and the doctor says I can have them all!"

"But, Aunt Martha," Mrs. Grey murmured feebly.

The doctor covered her murmur with another hearty, "We'll have them all, little Johnny-jump-up, in three days from now. I'll send the telegram myself that will bring them," and he took the address from Mrs. Grey.

As for Aunt Martha, she sat in equal consternation, but her face was inscrutable. She followed the doctor out, however, when he went, and he looked a little guilty, but with a vigorous pull at that restless forelock, a trick of his under embarrassment or stress of any kind, he inquired brusquely:

"You can manage it, can't you, Miss Martha? If you can't, I can take half a dozen of them," he added more boldly still.

"I can entertain them," said Miss Martha with stiff dignity, and the doctor went hurriedly out. The door once closed, he chuckled again and again, now and then throwing his head back with a big laugh while he exclaimed:

"Two 'niggers' and a parrot and puppies! I'm afraid the old house'll have

delirium tremens, to say nothing of Miss Martha. But I've been wanting to see that house stirred up ever since I was born. It was all I could do as a boy to keep from throwing stones at its constantly darkened windows. I would have married Martha long ago, bless my soul, if I hadn't been afraid of that house," he ended viciously.

In less than an hour he had sent this telegram speeding toward the little Alabama town.

"MR. JOHN CARTER:

"Little Eugene Grey is seriously ill. We wish to try home surroundings for her. Come at once and bring your two children, also Uncle Sam, Mammy Sue, the parrot and the puppies without fail.

"Signed, W. W. MURTON, M. D."

When the doctor came in two mornings later this last happy prescription had done much beneficent work. Gene's little face, though still thin, with only a growing tinge of pink, yet held the sparkle of happiness, and the pall of anxiety over the old house was lifted.

- Miss Martha met him at the door with a greeting almost gay, and when he went up to the sick-room he sat down by his little charge with great satisfaction. As he did so an envelope covering one of the glasses beside her caught his eye, and he read aloud the printed return address in the corner, "Eugene Grey & Co., Florists, —" he halted there inquiringly.

Mrs. Grey saw the puzzled look upon his face, and in the happiness which had come upon them all she laughingly said:

"Yes, we made a Blossom Shop of our old Alabama home, and — let me intro-

duce you to the head of our firm, — Eugene Grey, Dr. Murton,” playfully lifting the child’s hand to his.

“And mother is the Co.,” came Gene’s weak voice with an answering ring of gaiety.

Then they had to tell him all about their flower business, the cape jessamines and the smilax, and the funny, scary letters they once got.

“So,” said he at last, “you’ve been keeping a Blossom Shop. And didn’t I recognize your trade-mark the minute I saw this Johnny-jump-up? You’ve made it the business of your lives to send beauty and fragrance out over the world, — and you’ve certainly been distributing it since you came here. Why, look at Miss Martha and me! We are growing young and beautiful all the time under your spell.

"Don't ever give it up," he went on with vehemence, which the bobbing forelock emphasized, "perhaps you won't now be counting your profit in dollars and cents, since you no longer need to, but if you can go around scattering blossoms of happiness as you have over this home and town, you will store up that sort of treasure which the Bible tells about."

"Oh," cried Mrs. Grey under her breath, "don't, doctor, — think of the trouble we have made here."

But Miss Martha, flushed from the doctor's reference to herself, said with nervous quickness:

"There has been no trouble that anybody minded."

And the doctor chuckled again contentedly when he went out the stately doorway.

CHAPTER XIII

LIVELY VISITORS

THERE had been natural consternation on Mr. Carter's part when he received that astounding telegram, but Gene, — Alice Grey needed him, this thought quickly succeeded, and he did not waste a moment. As it happened, he had not left the house for his office, and as soon as Uncle Sam and Mammy Sue had subdued their amazement sufficiently he had them busy with preparations, while Hannie and May ran hither and thither in happy excitement.

Uncle Sam's principal part was the purchase of a new suit of clothes, a neces-

sity of long standing, but of which his skepticism of "Miss Alice's and his good fortune" had prevented practical recognition. Then he had to prepare and fit up a cage suitable for the puppies' journey.

Mammy Sue having instantly put every "nigger" within reach to washing and ironing, the result was, by train time, that night Hannie and May were dressed immaculately, Mammy Sue's dark dress and white apron could have stood alone and her head-kerchief was spotless, while the well packed and strapped trunks rested on the station platform awaiting the coming of the train.

Three days later they all stood at Miss Martha's door under the doctor's escort. He had met them at the train and escorted them to the house in order that he might be at hand without fail in case the

excitement proved too much for his little patient. As the party waited response to their ring, the parrot began squawking, "Get off the white folks' sidewalk, sidewalk," because she did not know what else to say which would so well voice her indignation over the experiences of the past few days. This put the doctor in high glee, and they were a merry party, for his word that Gene was already greatly improved with the happy prospect of their coming had greatly relieved Mr. Carter and made everybody very happy. The butler soon appeared, ushered them in with stately dignity and gingerly took charge of the parrot and puppies at the doctor's request.

Gene was lying in a big chair that was almost a bed, her face alight with joyous expectancy as the doctor led his flock quietly in, one by one. Mrs. Grey and



“USHERED THEM IN WITH STATELY DIGNITY AND GINGERLY TOOK CHARGE OF THE PARROT.”

Miss Martha stood anxiously by, fearful of the excitement.

Hannie and May greeted her and Mrs. Grey in turn with rapturous affection, then Mr. Carter followed, kissing the little girl in quiet tenderness and taking Alice Grey's hand with a warm clasp and one unguarded look into her tear-filled eyes.

Uncle Sam and Mammy Sue came next, and the quaint immaculateness of their dress, their quiet dignity, their respectful affection as they each in turn took the child in their arms and held her close without kissing her, was a new spectacle to Miss Martha, which completely reconciled her to their presence, — a state of mind she had not been able to reach before, though she had given no sign.

When all had been greeted and intro-

duced, and Uncle Sam and Mammy Sue had dropped discreetly into the background, Gene clasped her little hands ecstatically, and said:

“Now, where are the parrot and the puppies?”

Everybody laughed, the doctor most of all, for it was very apparent that joy had lifted the little invalid at once almost back into her old strength. His biggest smile beamed out while the forelock danced as he exclaimed hilariously:

“Oh, they are here all right! Bring them on, Uncle Sam,” and the old man hurried out to get them, while Miss Martha sat helplessly forestalled for the first time since she became mistress of the old Grey homestead. Alice Grey looked anxious protest at the doctor, but he ignored everybody.

Uncle Sam soon came in with the

parrot on his shoulder and a puppy under each arm, and they were put down in front of Gene on a carpet which might have been expected to cry out under such desecration.

Gene extended both hands. "Come, Hannie and May, and tell me what they do."

The little girls knelt at once beside her and Polly did not disappoint her breathless audience. She strutted about the puppies, from whom she had been unwillingly separated, crying, "My pups, my pups," rubbing her neck against their round backs and giving threatening orders of, "Don't touch 'em," to the lookers-on, interspersed with instructions to the doggies, such as, "Bite 'em, pup," or "Wash your faces," and "Mind your mother," things which the children had lately taught her to say, while the pup-

pies wagged their tails about her in delight.

Uncle Sam, much pleased with the success of the performance, said:

"I pretty near had all dat train full er folks out in de baggage car wid me looking' at dat parrot an' dem puppies."

"Well, well," said the doctor at last, rubbing his hands in final satisfaction, "I don't think this little Johnny-jump-up of that southern Blossom Shop needs me any more, so I must hustle out and look after some northern snow-drop," and he beamingly hurried away.

But, in spite of not being needed, "Miss Martha's Zoo," as he delightedly called it, fascinated him so that he was there every day, and soon had carried Mr. Carter's luggage whether or no from the hotel, where he had insisted upon stopping, to his own bachelor quarters.

Miss Martha in turn would take no denial from Mr. Carter to her invitation to dine at her house each day, for she liked the southern gentleman's pleasant, leisurely way of talking, his ready courtesy, and was greatly entertained with his seemingly inexhaustible fund of interesting stories full of a delicious, delicate humor.

The doctor began taking the liberty of dropping in to dinner also each day, and for a week the old house knew a gaiety unprecedented in its history. Children's voices echoed through the halls, not boisterously, for Mammy Sue had her charges too well in hand for that, but with innocent life and merriment. There were also some very exciting episodes, as was inevitable with such lively visitors as a parrot and two puppies.

The house stood upon a corner with a side door opening from the kitchen entry upon a side street. The parrot and puppies had been installed in a tool room opening also into this entry, and one morning Hannie and May, with Gene between them, stood looking from an upper window chatting gaily over everything which passed, when suddenly the two puppies dashed out the side door beneath them with Polly following and screaming excitedly, "My pups! my pups!"

Hannie and May turned in consternation to Mrs. Grey who sat reading near them, "Oh, the puppies are running away," they cried together, and dashed from the room down the back stairs and into the street in a twinkling.

There the puppies were, sure enough, racing down the decorous street with

Polly walking or flying as near as she could beside them, screaming constantly, "My pups! my pups!" and the two little girls wildly followed. Soon Uncle Sam and Mammy Sue were also hurrying along in the rear.

"What will Aunt Martha think?" said Mrs. Grey, looking from the upper window in laughing dismay. But the children raced on with no thought of the comedy they were furnishing staid New Englanders. People stood aside in astonished interest all along the way, and the doctor, with Mr. Carter in the carriage beside him, happening by at that moment, stopped his horse in equal amazement. Then, taking in the situation, he exclaimed to Mr. Carter with a big laugh, "Miss Martha's Zoo has stampeded!" turned his horse about and joined the pursuers.

Two blocks were safely passed while everybody watched with breathless amusement, runaways and pursuers all at high speed, the parrot keeping up with the puppies by constant flights, and then they were getting into the heart of the little city. Another crossing was before them, and oh, a big electric car came whizzing up the street!

"Oh, oh! the dear puppies will be killed sure," cried Hannie and May frantically, almost upon the runaways, yet not quite.

But the parrot's shrill, human cries of "My pups! my pups!" stopped the motorman and halted hurrying vehicles of all sorts while the parrot and puppies went safely across, and everybody laughed as Hannie and May, hurrying after, each captured a naughty little fellow as he struggled up the curb. Flushed and

panting, the children started back, laughing with the rest, while the much ruffled Polly flew along beside them varying her favorite exclamation of "My pups!" with a scolding cry of "Bad pups!"

The doctor and Mr. Carter met them at the first corner on their return, and drew the little girls and their puppies into the carriage with great hilarity on the doctor's part, but the parrot refused a ride, keeping out of the children's reach. Uncle Sam with Mammy Sue, who had also reached the busy street, both puffing and blowing, soon subdued Polly and, rebelling shrilly, she started back on Uncle Sam's shoulder. They had not gone far, however, before they met Miss Martha, who had followed too in excited interest, and Polly added the last touch to the doctor's enjoyment by leaving Uncle Sam and lighting upon

Miss Martha's prim shoulder. The obstinate bird refused to move, so Miss Martha, laughing as she had rarely done in her girlhood, walked down the street to her home, her hair blowing about her face and with Polly scolding lustily all the way.

By this time Mrs. Grey stood with Gene at the doorway rapidly telling her all that was passing.

When the gay crowd came up to them the doctor unloaded his passengers and then peered anxiously about.

"Have I got 'em all, — *all* the children and *all* the puppies?" he exclaimed. "I wouldn't want to lose one, you know," he added anxiously, while the children giggled merrily and Gene danced up and down in old-time glee.

"I tell you what," the doctor went on, pinching Gene's fast rounding cheek,

"I never saw anything like the thriving business Eugene Grey & Co.'s Blossom Shop is doing. It's imported so much of that southern sunshine for us, the first thing you know we'll thaw out completely," and he looked out the corner of his eye at Miss Martha, who was stroking Polly's ruffled feathers as she went up the steps.

The whole party went laughing and talking into the house, and at the same moment every bit of gloom for the little girl who could not see was dispelled forever from the stately old place, while she seemed at once to find her full measure of strength and buoyancy.

CHAPTER XIV

AN ARCH SCHEMER

THE doctor's enthusiasm grew apace with similar episodes and the returning roses in Gene's cheeks. He became daily more daring and was entirely responsible for the next startling event which surprised the old Grey homestead.

He was passing rapidly along the side street one day, his face set in the stern lines, when he saw ahead Uncle Sam standing rather disconsolately at the rear entrance of the Grey place, and instantly genial radiance transformed him.

"Hello, Uncle Sam," he called heartily from the nearest hearing point. "How are you?"

“Jes’ tol’a’ble, sah, jes’ tol’a’ble,” Uncle Sam trebled politely.

“Well, how do you like our city?” hailed the doctor again.

“Pretty well, sah,” Uncle Sam returned.

The doctor felt there was some reserve in this answer, halted by the old darky’s side, and knowing how to win confidence, he did not cease his questions until he had drawn out the fact that Uncle Sam “wasn’t used to so much fuss nights, and that though he wan’ to say ‘skeered,’ it was powerful lonesome out in that barn nights.” “De norf is a lonesome place fer niggers, anyways, doctor,” the old man ended.

“Then, too,” he went on again, “Mammy Sue ain’t jes’ satisfied in de house. You see, Miss Martha makes her sleep in one er de good back bedrooms,

'cause she says 'tain' sanitous, er some-thin', fer too many ter sleep in one room, an' won't let her sleep on de flo' by de chillun lack she want ter do. Sue say she ain' used ter sleepin' in white folkes beds in a room by herself, an' she don't want to disqualify her chillun, Miss Hannie an' Miss May, in no sech a way."

"Well, now," said the doctor wickedly, "why don't you and Mammy Sue get married right off and then she can stay with you, and she'll be satisfied, and you won't be lonesome any more."

"Jes' what I tells her, doctor," cried the old negro excitedly. "She done promise ter marry me 'fore we left home. Wid Miss Alice and Miss Gene gone I didn't have no fam'bly, an' I 'bleeged to have somebody to take keer on," he ended apologetically.

"Don't say a word more," said the doctor, putting out his hand. "I'll fix that thing all up for you," and he went down the street chuckling with an occasional big "ha, ha," as he exclaimed:

"A 'nigger' wedding at Miss Martha's! I'll fix that sure!"

And he did! Nobody ever knew how he managed it with Miss Martha, but that good lady had become helpless in his hands, having completely lost her bearings with the sudden invasion of her quiet spinsterhood. With her consent won, the doctor next called Mrs. Grey and Mr. Carter into the parlor and put the matter before them. It was discussed with great animation by Alice Grey, who thought it altogether malapropos from every standpoint, and the doctor, with his forelock bobbing energetically, would see no objection, declared Miss Martha had none,

with the result that he again had his way. Mr. Carter listened in quiet amusement, taking no part in the discussion.

The doctor did not linger after winning his case, and left Alice Grey and Mr. Carter standing in the parlor alone together for the first time since his coming.

She was between laughter and tears, and turning an appealing face to him, she said:

"What do you think of this absurd thing?"

She did not dream how beautiful she was in a becoming, modish gown with her face full of April charm.

He braced his broad shoulders and put his arms firmly behind his back as he looked down hungrily into her eyes.

"I should not worry about it if I were you," he answered finally. "You are not



"HE LOOKED DOWN HUNGRILY INTO HER EYES."

responsible for it in the least, the two old children will be happy, — and happiness is somewhat rare.”

His voice, always full and mellow, dropped into sadness as he added the last phrase, while his eyes turned away from her.

She took a step nearer to him, and looking up again with something pregnant of tender things in her own expressive gaze, she said softly:

“You have made me very happy by coming to me in my great trouble and helping to bring my Gene back to health and strength.”

Her voice quivered a little at the last and she almost touched his arm with out-reaching fingers, but he looked steadfastly away, setting his lips firmly as his strong will vociferated blindly, “I will not rob her of her wealth,” silencing the

yearning of his heart to take her in his arms, whether or no.

Her eyes finally fell with a startled, hurt look and she walked slowly out of the room, while he remained immovable, with clenched hands still behind his back.

The house was soon in excitement over the wedding, — the very first to take place within its walls. The children were in a perfect glee over it, Miss Martha smiled in a way that relieved Mrs. Grey entirely, and even the house servants went about their work with subdued gaiety.

Mammy Sue had been very obstreperous at first, saying, "No, indeed, she wan' gwine to marry twell she got home," but Uncle Sam, with the skill of masculinity which the ages have constantly demonstrated, over-rode her objection.

When Miss Martha and Mrs. Grey asked about the wedding gown with feminine solicitude it turned out that a white swiss dress with long train, orange blossoms and veil, white gloves and satin slippers had all been carefully packed in the bottom of the Carter children's trunk!

Mrs. Grey and Miss Martha laughed together like two girls when the wedding finery was displayed to them. All the pent-up gaiety of Miss Martha's nature, which was her natural New England inheritance, and which, as in many another instance, had been held in rigid subjection by life-time repression, suddenly overflowed its bounds in riotous freedom.

"Why, Mammy Sue, how did you happen to bring them?" asked Miss Martha when she could find voice. Mrs. Grey, knowing the negro capacity for unexpectedness, was less surprised.

Mammy Sue laughed with them and then explained with the accustomed bluff belligerency that she used whenever Sam was concerned:

“Why, dat Sam he nuver give me no res’ day nor night twell I got um, an’ promised to marry him soon’s Miss Alice cum back, — an’ when I cum ’way fum home ’course I wan’ gwine leave um fer no nigger ter steal!” Which was timely discretion beyond dispute.

Uncle Sam proved to have been equally forehanded in the acquisition of his new suit for the journey, which with the additional purchase of white gloves and a white tie completed his wedding outfit.

So in the evening of that day the grim old Grey homestead was lit from top to bottom while the minister and a little company of neighbors and friends who

had been lately dropping in, in the delightful, neighborly fashion of New England, gathered in the parlor. The children fluttered here and there in pretty party dresses, Gene winning every heart with her sweet, upturned face, round and rosy, reaching out eager little hands to everybody, — once more in a world of love and light, — while the doctor strutted about, his genial radiance in full sway and acting as chief dignitary of the occasion.

Gene sat by Miss Martha at last, everybody breathlessly waiting the entrance of the bride and groom. She drew the dear auntie's face down and whispered ecstatically, "I have always so wanted a wedding at my own dear home, and now I have one," and Miss Martha smiled back into the little face with a tenderness that made the neighbors and friends exchange

glances with a mist in their eyes. Home had expanded at last for the small hermit heart, linking North and South indissolubly.

At a signal from the doctor, Mrs. Grey began playing a wedding march upon the old piano which had not been opened for many, many years, the minister stood in place and there was a hush as the unique bridal couple appeared. Mammy Sue in all her bridal finery, her portly ebony shoulders and arms showing prominently through the white swiss, hung upon Uncle Sam's proud arm, while he struggled to make his rheumatic gait firm and gallant, his black face with its snowy fringe shining with happiness.

The simple ceremony was solemnly said, a prayer followed, and then the happy couple bowed right and left

as everybody offered congratulations. Mammy Sue said to Sam later, — in the privacy of the bridal chamber out in the barn, — after she had put “her chillun” to bed as usual, “Ever’ thing was done jes’ like southern quality would er done it. I know now dat Miss Marthy is quality, but I’m ’bleeged to say I done had my doubts wid me er sleepin’ in dat good bedroom.”

The doctor’s congratulations had been most hearty and his white forelock never flopped more merrily than when he slipped into the bride’s hand a ten dollar gold piece for a wedding present before hurrying off to answer some call. He patted Gene upon the head a moment at leaving, and said with gay bluster in her ear:

“I tell you, that Blossom Shop of Eugene Grey & Co. is doing a thriving

business scattering the bloom of happiness!"

The little girl laughed back merrily; she always delighted in his references to their "Blossom Shop," and though she did not fully comprehend, greatly enjoyed his figurative applications.

"Nothing like getting things started," he chuckled to himself as he went down the steps. "There's another wedding which ought to take place, if I'm any judge of symptoms, — and, on my soul, if Miss Martha keeps on growing young and pretty and tractable as she has the past week, there'll be two! Blamed if I ain't getting over my awe of that old house."

Seated with Mr. Carter that night after the wedding, before the comfortable log fire of his living-room, it being a cool June day, he turned suddenly and said:

"That's the way of happiness, Mr. Carter!"

A quiet smile was Mr. Carter's only reply, and the doctor then burst out with:

"Don't you know faint heart never won fair lady? Go in and win,—you need her and your children need her."

John Carter sat silent a moment and then he replied:

"That is true, but you have not seen her struggle with poverty as I have, and do you think I would rob her now? She no longer needs me," he added firmly.

"Money, money!" exclaimed the doctor vehemently, "I've seen its futility as far as happiness is concerned, and if I read that little woman aright, she would rather have your love than millions. As for the child, you would not rob her."

"You do not know all that I do," Mr. Carter returned with quiet finality.

Then the doctor fumed good-naturedly; he knew well he must not venture too far. "Here I got up this wedding to show you two the thing to do, and I believe, on my soul, it is going to be wasted, unless I can persuade Miss Martha —" And Mr. Carter laughed in turn, urging him on.

The next day, when the doctor was at the house, he found opportunity to say slyly to Mrs. Grey, with the stern look in full evidence, but wrinkles threatening capture of the keen eyes as he glanced significantly over at Mr. Carter, "As I understand it, the business of Eugene Grey & Co. is to market the products of sunshine, — joy and happiness, — be careful that you do not go out of your line. It never pays to deal in stock alien to your main business."

Again he found a chance to approach

her when alone from a different angle.

“Mrs. Grey, I am persuaded that the Blossom Shop is neglecting a great opportunity to enlarge its business of dispensing happiness, and of putting it on a permanent basis. Two motherless children and a lonely man, — how can you ignore their need?”

She looked up, startled at the real earnestness of his usually jolly voice, as she knew it, and her eyes fell at the keenness of his gaze. He seemed to arraign her and she suddenly felt herself without defense. But he turned away instantly, and she did not need to make reply.

There were a few days more of gaiety in the old house, and then the Carters, with the bride and groom, the parrot and puppies, went back to Alabama and things were more quiet. But the gloom

did not return to the old place for Gene. She had learned every nook and corner with the happy guiding hands of Hannie and May and no depression came upon her as they left. Business matters had moved on satisfactorily, but everything was not in final shape, and Gene being in perfect physical condition, Mrs. Grey decided, with Dr. Murton's entire approval, to take the little girl at once to New York for examination, and if all seemed well, to plan at least for an operation.

So it came about that they were soon before the great oculist to whom they had long dreamed of going.

CHAPTER XV

UNFOLDINGS

AFTER a careful examination of the little one's eyes the famous oculist cried buoyantly:

"I can almost say I *know* I can give sight to this child."

And then they trod on air as they walked down Broadway with an appointment for the operation two days distant. Their shining faces made more than one passer-by turn back for a second look:

"Oh, Gene," cried Mrs. Grey, suddenly stopping before a florist's beautiful show-window, and looking at the firm's name upon the sign.

"'Shaw & Co.' Why, that is the

name of the firm who were so good to us, told us how to pack our cape jessamines and how to manage our smilax, and, yes, this is the old address!"

Gene clasped her hands in joy.

"Oh, mother, let's go in and see him!"

They did, and taking from her purse one of her business cards with Eugene Grey & Co. and her home address upon it, Mrs. Grey led the child into the store and sent the card back to Mr. Shaw, who was in the office, the clerk informed her.

The clerk returned a moment later, looking a little bewildered, but said Mr. Shaw would be glad to see Eugene Grey & Co. at once.

With a happy smile, Mrs. Grey went back with Gene and enjoyed the amazement of a kindly gray-haired man when the little girl with pretty outreaching

hands was introduced to him as Eugene Grey of Eugene Grey & Co.

Mr. Shaw put his arms about the child while sudden tears filled his eyes, and the eyes of the mother as well.

"Please tell me all about it," he said.

"There is little to tell you," she returned, "except that it was necessary for us to do something, and the flowers opened a way. My little Gene was named for her father, and we thought her name would sound more business-like to strange, far-away dealers."

"Do you know," exclaimed Mr. Shaw suddenly, looking down upon the little head at his knee, "that Eugene Grey & Co. discovered the smilax as a marketable product, and opened up a wonderful industry for the Southern States?"

"I know," Mrs. Grey returned, smiling, "that some people kindly give

us credit for it, but several others, I hear, began shipping it about the time we did, and it is an open question as to who was the real discoverer."

"I shall vote for Eugene Grey & Co.," he said warmly.

The city florist was all friendly interest in the well-remembered firm which had revealed so unique and charming a personality, and regretted and rejoiced to learn that they had gone out of business. He also heard with joy of the happy prospect in store two days later. He seemed so like an old friend, and they were so happy Mrs. Grey could not forbear telling him something of all their good fortune.

And so it came to pass that when the bandage was about to be removed from the child's eyes after a most satisfactory operation, a large box of beautiful cape

jessamines with Mr. Shaw's card attached was waiting for her at the doctor's office, and when the wonderful moment came, a starry, white southern blossom lay in the child's lap.

The bandage was lifted in breathless silence.

"Oh, oh, cape jessamine!" cried the child, as her gaze fell upon the flower, its peculiar fragrance and her ready fingers identifying its beauty. Then, "Mother, mother," she breathed, as Mrs. Grey knelt before her.

No need for little fingers to identify there. No other face could hold that rapture.

Such a simple thing it was at last to have meant so much: all the years of longing and struggle, all the hoping and despairing, all the sacrifice, all the pleading with God.

Such happiness as came to Alice Grey with the sight of her child is only known to those to whom has first come the terrible truth, "My baby is blind!" With this background it was not a happiness in the moment of fulfillment for gay exuberance, — the rather for ready tears, it seemed to Gene's mother. The little girl saw them often in her mother's eyes with that wonderful new process of vision, and felt them on her cheek as the caressing fingers still loved to make discovery in the old dear way, while they lingered in New York for a time, waiting the great surgeon's permission to leave.

Finally the tears troubled the child, who came to know intuitively that some special sorrow as well as joy was creeping into the mother-heart. She would wipe them away with her bit of a

handkerchief and ask over and over, "Mother, what makes you cry?"

And again and again, the answer came, "Why, darling, I do not know; I am very, very happy, but I guess I am very tired."

They had a small suite of rooms at a great hotel, with a sunny sitting-room, bedroom and bath, that Gene might have the best of conditions in which to recuperate from the operation, but it was a very lonely spot with the tumult of a great city surrounding it, and only un-leeding strangers when they stepped beyond it. All was so different from the little old Alabama town. And then the thought followed overwhelmingly that there was no longer any home in the South waiting for them. The old house had long stood for near kindred with her, and it was gone! She knew that pressure

would be brought to keep her in the North for Gene's education, and she wanted the child's training to be national, not narrow or sectional; part of it must come from the fine old girls' college of her home town, — but what had she to go back to in the South? Only the graves and the ashes of her home. Then she next recognized that there was always inner protest when she thought of taking any money from the Grey estate, much as she had learned to love Aunt Martha. She was glad for Gene to have what was hers by right of birth, but no blood of the Greys ran in her veins, — and somehow she would rather not take it. Perhaps because she had forfeited her right to it by bitterness of heart. Oh, if John had only asked her after she knew of Gene's inheritance, — but he hadn't, and she knew he wouldn't. Per-

haps he did not care any longer for her, she had repulsed him so often. And her spirit sank low at the thought. A sense of unprotected loneliness engulfed her.

So the moment of relaxation from intense excitement had brought an endless round of thought that wore heavily upon Alice Grey. She had full opportunity for reflection, as Gene was so delighted with seeing that she would stand at the window looking out as long as her not yet strong eyes allowed, finger delightedly bits of ribbon of varied colors, or interest herself in examining numberless things which held new fascination for her within.

There came strange reproach and regret, too, into that endless round of thought for Alice Grey. It almost seemed that the new sense of sight which

had come to the child had penetrated the recesses of the mother's heart, and laid bare its unworthiness. She had felt before that it was sufficient to turn the sunlit side always to the child, but now for this keen new vision there must be no shadow of unworthiness.

She grew timorous and dejected as she brooded, finally concluding that she had failed fundamentally in faith and trust. The new joy was not complete because she had never trusted God fully; she had worn herself out with single-handed effort when He had given her John Carter who would gladly have shared her struggle, and now would be sharing her joy. But she had refused his help in stubborn pride and God had punished her by sweeping all her resources away with ruthless flame, performing the blessed miracle Himself, it was true, but leaving

them alone at last without sweet home ties and dear home-sharers of joy, which had once been theirs to accept.

She had been self-righteous and bitter, too, when she had thought herself only self-respecting. Had her heart been sweet and pure, she would have opened the trunk which came long years before and lovingly have taken out the things which she knew Mother Grey would have been glad for her to use in her need, and the fateful paper with its message of joy and relief would have come to light and spared her little girl years of darkness, and herself years of fruitless struggle. But she had been too proud, too bitter to touch the things which held release. It was true she had not planted bitterness in the heart of her child, but she had cherished the ugly thing in her own breast,—only to find at last that even

Aunt Martha was upright and generous, and loving too, when the test came.

How could she ever trust herself to train a child of wealth in high, unselfish living? Just two of them with all the money they could spend, and the old objectives gone; was she capable of handling the new assets of the firm wisely? She had learned how to steer through the perils of poverty, but the treacherous possibilities of wealth she knew not of, and she lost faith in the financial ability of the senior member completely, with sincere doubts as to her moral integrity as well. Indeed, she wholly lost her bearings, and life for the time held no goal. It seemed an empty prospect.

Then there was John, lonely, needing her; Hannie and May lacking a guiding woman's hand so sorely, — she could see it all clearly now as she looked back to

the days she had spent in the motherless home, — and that was what Dr. Murton meant the day after Uncle Sam's wedding when he looked at her so keenly. The children already drifted more or less aimlessly, and ere long would repudiate Mammy Sue's authority of ignorance, while her own Gene needed greatly the daily interchange of kindly offices, gentle forbearance and generous sharing, which two sisters would give her. And nowhere in the world, she felt sure, was the other half of that choicest thing in the universe, a home, real, complete, waiting for them.

No, there was no one but John Carter to whom she could link her life, — and he had gone out of it forever. Everything would tend to separate them more and more, and she was certain that, having scorned his help in her needy

struggle for money, he would never come to her, a rich woman, and propose to rob her of her wealth.

In her agitation she did not realize that there was ample cause for chaotic emotion in the reaction from months and years of heavy strain, as well as from the recent excitement; she merely felt herself dropping into a state of collapse that frightened her. It was only of a few days' duration, this tumult of mind, but it proved to be of tremendous import in the future of her child and herself, for, in a way life has of unfolding a soul, it was through this brief upheaval that the old constraints were broken, the old narrowed interest which centered in her child and herself began to broaden and they were ushered into fuller, richer experience.

A little incident brought the crisis.

Gene hung over her mother one evening when the strain told plainly in the loved face.

"Oh, mother," said the child at last, smiling in sudden merriment with a happy flash of thought, "send for Mr. Carter and Hannie and May and Uncle Sam and Mammy Sue and the parrot and the puppies! They will make you all right as they did me."

And Alice Grey's heart halted in its beating. Should she, indeed, send for John Carter, creep into his arms and beg him to take care of her and Gene? That was the only way, she knew, he would ever come,—and O, what a relief it would be to turn over all the business, all the responsibility to him, and just rest in his love and care! Yet, how could she violate all her womanly instincts?

But desperation was upon her that eve-

ning: she was withholding the sunlight from her child for the first time in her life, and just when the little one was ready to take in every glinting ray of prismatic color!

She laughed almost hysterically over Gene's suggestion after that rapid mental recapitulation, and then with the glee upon her, she said:

"I will, darling, this moment, — that is, I will send for John — Mr. Carter, make him come and get us and take us back just as soon as possible to Hannie and May and all the rest."

And speedily another telegram went southward to the little Alabama town.

CHAPTER XVI

LOVE BLOSSOMS

JOHN CARTER sat alone in the library when the message was handed him. The children had gone up-stairs to bed. He, too, was unusually depressed, for he had been trying that evening to compass the impossible for him, to fill their mother's place. He had told them of little faults that needed correcting. Gently, tenderly he had done it, but had only succeeded in depressing them and himself. As they went dejectedly out at last, he sat staring dully into space.

Then the message was suddenly laid before him.

"We are well, but need you. Please come at once.

"Signed, ALICE GREY."

He was startled, alarmed. Had some new trouble befallen them? "Both are well," he reassured himself. Then it must be some trouble about the transfer of the estate. His heart leaped at the thought—perhaps there was some failure—and Alice had turned to him. Then he sternly rebuked himself and braced his shoulders, declaring vehemently: "If there is any technicality that the law can get around, I will ferret it out!"

Of course he went on the morning's out-going train, kissing his little girls with infinite tenderness in atonement for the night's rebuke.

Impatiently he sped along till the jour-

ney's end was reached, and a cab ride across the city carried him to the little suite of rooms in the great hotel where Alice Grey was waiting in alternate modest uncertainty and unrestrained joy.

Gene was asleep; her mother had not told her of the telephone message which announced Mr. Carter's arrival, and the child had gone to sleep as usual.

The rap upon the sitting-room door came at last, and she opened it for John Carter with a trembling hand.

He stepped within, eyes alight, but holding himself in perfect composure.

A moment she stood poised before him as they gazed into one another's eyes, forgetting the formalities of greeting. Then her face grew tremulous, child-like, and putting out her hands, she ran

to him and hid it on his breast. Tender arms were about her instantly, while he murmured:

“What is it? Tell me.”

She could only sob a moment, and then came a little struggling laugh.

“John, it is nothing — but I want you — take us, please.”

He held her close a moment more in the pent-up tenderness of years, then restraining himself with sudden remembrance, he led her to a seat and firmly said:

“But we must talk things over first, Alice. I must make you see that this is folly.”

And this he tried to do, but vainly. Instead she made him see that she wanted no money for herself, — she would far rather add to the possessions of the heart by gathering into it Hannie and May

and himself, — and being only, after all, of common, human clay, he could not resist the sweetness of her plea.

Next morning the hills untied their bonnets most merrily, and the bobolinks began in full-throated joyousness.

Then the secret was unfolded. There was to be a wedding, — and mother was to be the bride! And they and Mr. Carter and Hannie and May were to belong to each other. Gene was in ecstasy. When was the wedding — their own beautiful wedding — to be?

Well, — perhaps that night!

“Oh! Oh!” And the little girl was overcome with wonder.

“I do wish Hannie and May could come,” said the child.

“Yes, I do too,” replied Mrs. Grey earnestly, “but that hardly seems possi-

ble, darling; Mr. Carter and I talked it all over."

Gene thought a moment and then exclaimed: "But, — can't we have Aunt Martha, — dear Aunt Martha?"

Mrs. Grey was disconcerted at first. Then she said quietly, "I will see, — perhaps we can." And the result was that the wedding was postponed two days and two letters went to the New England town, one inviting Miss Martha and telling the story of love and waiting and renunciation, the other from Mr. Carter to Dr. Murton, begging him to be best man at the wedding.

When Miss Martha received hers she was shocked, indignant, resentful, and stubbornly decided she would not go. But a visit from Dr. Murton with strenuous effort brought a change of mind and the two went together for the sacred

ceremony in the small hotel sitting-room.

When it was over at high noon, and refreshments had been served for the little group, Miss Martha drew Gene to her and said sadly, for she had been greatly disappointed that Alice would not share in the Grey estate:

"Little girl, do you know how much money is going to be yours?"

"No," returned the child wonderingly.

Miss Martha named a large sum.

"Oh," said Gene slowly, not comprehending, but realizing it was a great deal.

"All that for one little blind girl who can see?"

A tearful stillness fell upon them all. Then suddenly the child ran up to Dr. Murton and her face was a marvel of radiance. Laying her little hand upon

his cheek (a trick of her blindness which she had not yet dropped), she said:

“Doctor, are there many little blind children in the world?”

“Yes,” answered the doctor sadly, “I am afraid there are.”

“And some that could be made to see as I have been if their mothers had the money to take them to the great doctor?”

“I think so, little Johnny-jump-up,” replied the doctor, looking tenderly down into the small earnest face.

Then she turned quickly to her mother:

“Oh, mother, dearest, mayn’t I give some of it to help those blind children to see?”

There was silence again for a moment and at last her mother turned to Mr. Carter and said quietly:

“ Could it be managed legally? ”

“ I think so, — through Miss Martha it can be handled within the demands of law, — if she is willing,” he replied slowly.

And at that moment Miss Martha, not noticing what he had said, but with eyes full of tears, cried tremulously:

“ Child, let your old aunty share with you in this, — I will build a sanatorium to which the children shall come.”

And before the talk was over it was arranged that Dr. Murton should give his time largely to looking up the children in Alabama and Massachusetts, — for this philanthropic plan was to link North and South in its beneficence.

Dr. Murton rubbed his hands in glee at last. “ I have wanted to belong to this blossom firm of Eugene Grey & Co. ever since I first heard of it. Nothing could

please me better, — and — ” looking around upon the joy about him, he laid a hand that trembled upon Miss Martha’s arm, but pulling the restless forelock vigorously with the other, he went on boldly: “ if it keeps on pushing business at the rate it has been doing for the past few weeks, — well, — there is no telling what Miss Martha and I may do! ”

And Miss Martha blushed like a girl of sixteen! The doctor saw it, too, with a light in his eye.

Ten days later, with business matters all arranged, the evening train from the North was bearing Mr. and Mrs. Carter and Gene Grey into the little old Alabama town once more.

Gene sat by a car window watching the changing sunset and repeating softly:

“How he sets, I know not.
There seemed a purple stile
Which little yellow boys and girls
Were climbing all the while.”

Then the train rolled into the little station at the end of the long straggling street, and there were Hannie and May waiting for them, rapturously happy with the thought of father, mother and the dearest little sister, who could *see* with them all the beautiful things of the world.

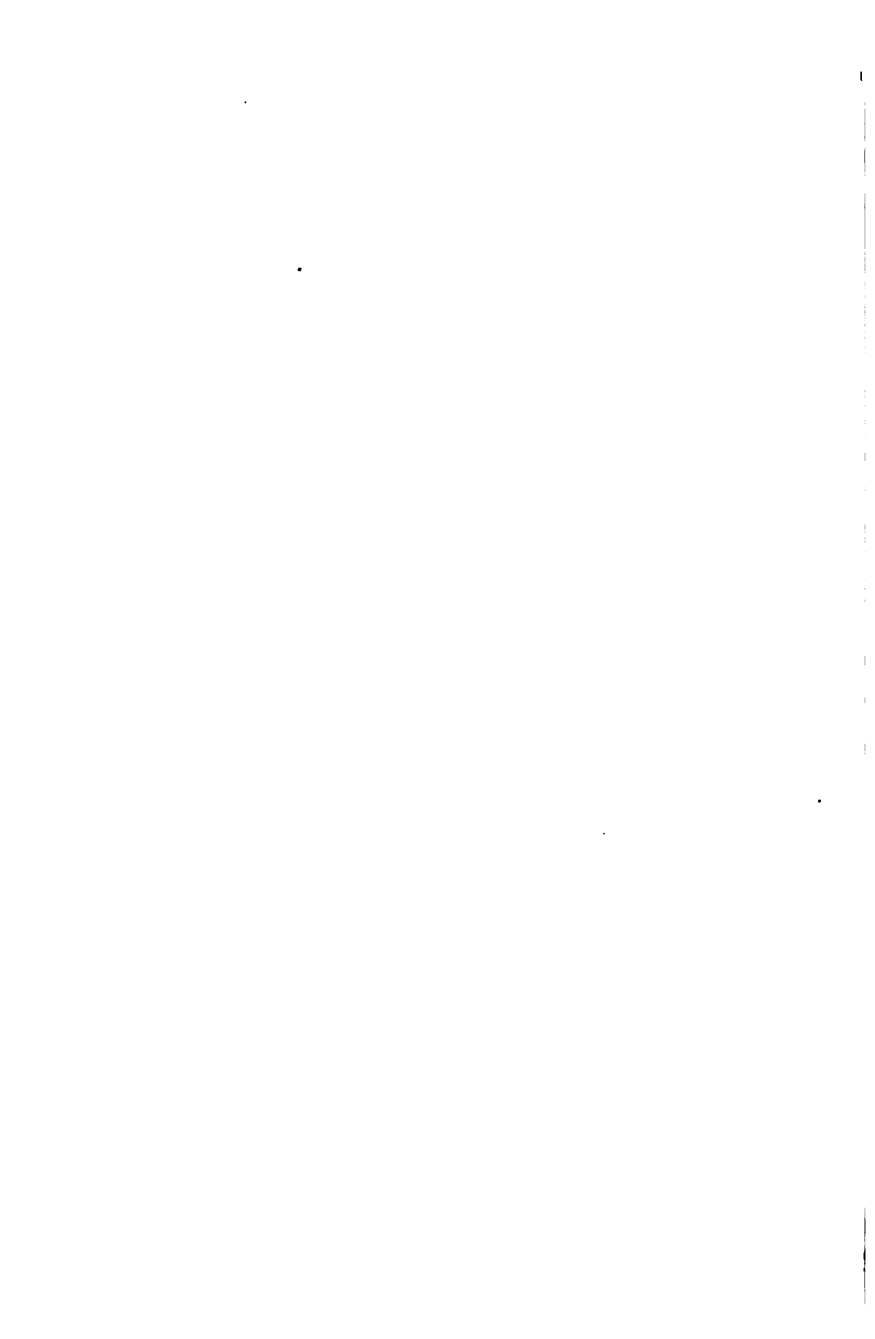
They sat on old Queen's back ready to take Gene up between them, while Mammy Sue and Uncle Sam beamed in the background.

And so,

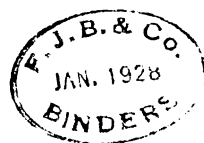
“A dominie in gray
Put gently up the evening bars
And led the flock away.”

THE END

3471



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